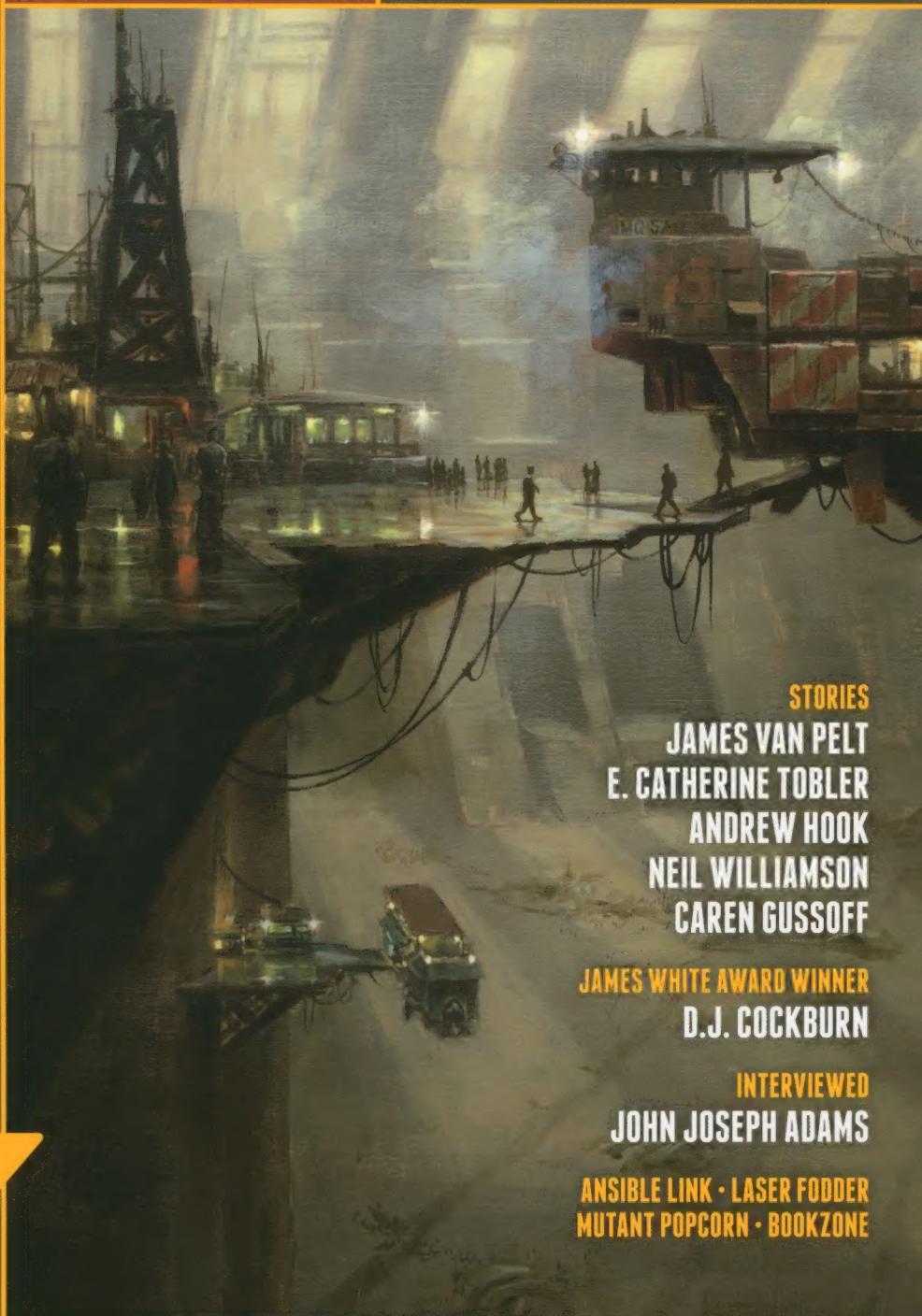


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NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

BRITISH FANTASY AWARD WINNER: BEST MAGAZINE



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INTERVIEWED
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We don't normally think of theatre as a medium in which sf thrives, outside a small canon of tourist-bait musicals that treat the genre as either a convenience or a joke. A few greybeards remember the brief utopian moment of the late seventies and early eighties when UK outfits like Impact Theatre Cooperative and Ken Campbell's Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool were putting sf in the vanguard of alternative performance, while in the US Chicago's Organic Theatre had built up a bulging portfolio of original and adapted work under founder director Stuart Gordon – years before Charles Band's Empire Pictures propelled him to greater fame as a filmmaker with his debut *Re-Animator*. But if a lot of us would struggle to nominate anything of comparable moment since those, it's not as if sf theatre went away.

The other week a couple of wonderful postgrads, Chris Callow from Lincoln and Adam Roberts' student Susan Gray from Royal Holloway, put together an event called *Staging the Future*: the first international conference on sf theatre, with NYRSF legend Jen Gunnels keynoting, and reports from around the world on adventures in the theatre of the imaginable past and present. We had Shakespeare and Coward, Ayckbourn and Miéville, early-modern lunar larks and adaptations from *Frankenstein* to *Princess Mononoke*, and an amazing gallery of variations on post-apocalyptic and posthuman performance. I got to exhume memories of Ken Campbell's 22-hour epic chronicle of the UK counterculture *The Warp* in the derelict Regent cinema in Edinburgh in 1980 with a young Bill Nighy (and then-struggling playwright Terry Johnson taking Jim Broadbent's parts because Ken knew he could plumb toilets). We were introduced to the work of Bella Poynton, a young campus playwright who's been pushing the limits of theatre space, time, and action to Stapledonian extremes, staging an interstellar war or a ten-million-year human-machine romance with beguiling warmth, wit, and sense of embodied wonder.

There's an old misperception that theatre is a medium in competition with film, and doomed to try to mimic its art of illusion. But theatre is above all a space of suggestion and implication, where embodied physicality can conjure worlds with a gesture or line. In that respect, it's far closer to what sf does with the written word, only kissed with the spell of live mimesis and response. The moment that wrote the grammar for western theatre was the young Aeschylus' staging of the *Iliad* with two actors, no set, and a single location. It's a moment that theatre re-enacts nightly: as Salford's Bob Moyler, who put on his gloriously unnerving Čapek homage *Public Service Robots*, remarked in our session on end-of-the-world theatre, "You could show the apocalypse on stage with a biscuit." Nor are the medium's moments of glory the tears in rain that might be feared. Impact's Russell Hoban collaboration *The Carrier Frequency* has been the object of a meticulous tribute reconstruction off a video of the original staging. Daisy Campbell, daughter of Ken, is following up her celebrated revivals of *The Warp* with a long-hoped-for resurrection of the SF Theatre's breakout production *Illuminatus!* Even Stuart Gordon has found his way back to theatre, not only with 2011's *Re-Animator: The Musical*, but latterly branching out into the kind of work that made Organic Theatre risky and notorious in the first place; his latest is the stage horror *Taste*, a dramatisation of the Arwin Meiwes consensual-cannibalism case. And the fans, as fans will, are networking. Jen Gunnels has a Facebook group, more conferences are mooted, and a dozen of the participants in Susan and Chris's event were working on sf plays. The oldest spectacle is suddenly, thrillingly, the newest.

Nick Lowe

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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

'All You Zombies' Dept. 'Which Bafta and Emmy-winning actress is the great-grandfather of the former Prime Minister Herbert Asquith?' (*Independent* quiz)

Awards. Gemmell (heroic fantasy). Novel: Mark Lawrence, *Emperor of Thorns*. Debut: Brian McClellan, *Promise of Blood*. Cover: Jason Chan for *Emperor of Thorns* above. • John W. Campbell Memorial: Marcel Theroux, *Strange Bodies*. • Nebula: Novel: Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice*. • Prometheus (libertarian) special life achievement: Vernor Vinge. • SF Hall of Fame: Leigh Brackett, Frank Frazetta, Stanley Kubrick, Hayao Miyazaki and Olaf Stapledon. • Bram Stoker (horror). Novel: Stephen King, *Doctor Sleep*. • Sturgeon (short): Sarah Pinsker, 'In Joy, Knowing the Abyss' (*Strange Horizons*).

The Weakest Link. Host: 'Which G.O. wrote *Animal Farm*?' Contestant: 'I've got George Osborne in my head' (*BBC Pointless*) • Host: 'Which British author wrote *The Jungle Book*?' Contestant: 'E.L. James.' (*ITV Ejector Seat*) • Host: 'In what novel by H.G. Wells does an inventor travel into the future?' Contestant: 'Great Expectations.' (*ITV The Chase*)

Publishers & Sinners. Angry Robot discontinued its Strange Chemistry (YA genre) and Exhibit A (crime) imprints in June, 'due mainly to market saturation' – that is, others have more successfully saturated the market.

GRMM Is Everywhere. The BBC apologised for accidentally sending test-only news alerts to millions of BBC News app subscribers, including the deeply

shocking 'BREAKING NEWS No nudity in latest episode of *Game of Thrones*!!!'

Queen's Birthday Honours. John Barrowman – Captain Jack Harkness in *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* – was made an MBE; so was composer Laurie Johnson, who scored Dr Strangelove and wrote the *Avengers* and *New Avengers* TV theme music. Patrick Woodroffe, not the late genre artist but the lighting designer for the 2012 Olympic ceremonies – whose stage projects include *Batman Live* – became a CBE. (BBC, 14 June)

Silly Season. *Daily Mirror* headline: 'Retired US Marine claims he spent 17 years on MARS protecting five human colonies from Martians.' Perks after 20 years of duty: 'a retirement ceremony on the moon that he claims was presided over by VIPs including ex-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.' Gosh.

Ian McEwan sold his archives to the University of Texas for \$2 million, and in an interview revealed the sf delights awaiting researchers: '...my novel *Atonement* started out as a science fiction story set two or three centuries into [the] future.' (*Guardian*)

J.R.R. Tolkien's Balrog is remembered in the naming of a 16-foot, 900-pound crocodilian from 60 million years ago: *Anthracosuchus balrogus*. (*International Business Times*, 3 June) But was it a giant flaming reptile? Did it wield a multi-thonged whip?

Court Circular. The 50 pre-1923 Sherlock Holmes stories are in

the public domain, ruled the 7th Circuit US Court of Appeals on 16 June – rejecting the ever-rapacious Conan Doyle estate's argument that copyright protection for the ten remaining 1923–1927 tales should extend backwards over the entire Holmes canon.

Eoin Colfer, author of the 'Artemis Fowl' fantasies, is now the third Irish laureate for children's fiction: Laureate na nÓg.

Thog's Masterclass. *Radiophonic Workshop Dept.* 'He walked in and heard a sound like a tomb.' (Lee Child, *Tripwire*, 1999) • *This Day All Thogs Die*. 'Indignation and confusion appeared to flush through Chief Mandich in waves, staining his skin with splotches like the marks of an infection.' 'Anodyne Systems, the sole licensed manufacturer of SOD-CMOS.' 'He fluttered his hands in front of his face to ward off emotions for which he had no use.' 'He shook his head. Carried by its own momentum, his head continued rocking from side to side on his weak neck.' 'Her voice ached like Morn's arm.' 'Food and coffee had rubbed the smudge from his gaze.' 'Min's jaws clenched and loosened as if she were chewing iron.' 'Smoke seeped out of her hair as if the mind under it had been burned to the ground.' 'Lane hid a grin behind a fringe of unclean hair.' 'His voice sounded as bleak as hard vacuum.' 'Standing rigid, as if he were remembering a crucifixion, he shouted.' 'The sound of knives filled Hyland's voice.' 'Blaine wore her sexuality like an accusation.' 'In response he brandished his beard at her like a club.' (all Stephen R. Donaldson, *The Gap into Ruin: This Day All Gods Die*, 1995)

R.I.P.

Ken Brown (1957–2014), UK fan, convention-goer and regular book reviewer for *Interzone* in the David Pringle era, died from pancreatic cancer on 19 May; he was 57.

John Cocchi (1939–2014), US film historian whose *Second Feature: The Best of the 'B' Films* (2000) covers much sf and horror, was found to have died circa 16 June after being missing since April; he was 74.

Philip Curtis (1920–2012; late notice), UK teacher and author of much sf including the 12-book 'Mr Browser' series for younger readers, opening with *Mr Browser and the Brain Sharpeners* (1979), died on 10 October 2012 aged 92.

Felix Dennis (1947–2014), UK publishing baron who long ago featured in the Oz trial and whose Dennis Publishing magazines include *Bizarre*, *Fortean Times* and *Viz*, died on 22 June; he was 67.

Oscar Dystel (1912–2014), US publisher who turned around the ailing Bantam Books in the early 1950s and remained chairman until 1980, died on 28 May; he was 101. His bestselling acquisitions included *The Exorcist* and *Jaws*.

Nancy Garden (1938–2014), US author of fantasy, horror and LGBT fiction for younger readers, died on 24 June aged 76. She won the 2003 Margaret Edwards Award for life achievement in YA literature.

H.R. Giger (1940–2014), influential Swiss artist and designer noted for his surrealist/decadent 'bio-mechanoid' paintings and (most famously) his creation of the

alien technology and grotesque monster for *Alien* (1979), died on 12 May; he was 74. Giger received a Spectrum Grandmaster Award in 2005 and entered the SF Hall of Fame in 2013.

Mihail Gramescu (1951–2014), award-winning Romanian author of several sf novels and collections who was part of his country's 1980s 'New Wave', died on 13 May aged 63.

Sam Greenlee (1930–2014), US author of *The Spook who Sat by the Door* (1969) – a near-future novel of black uprisings, filmed in 1973 – died on 19 May aged 83.

Dan Jacobson (1929–2014), South African-born novelist whose works include the dystopian *The Confessions of Joseph Baisz* (1977), the post-holocaust *Her Story* (1987) and the alternate-history *The God-Fearer* (1992), died on 12 June; he was 85.

Daniel Keyes (1927–2014), author of the powerful, unforgettable sf tragedy *Flowers for Algernon* (April 1959 F&SF; novel 1966), died on 15 June aged 86. The short *Flowers* won a Hugo and the novel a Nebula, both richly deserved. Numerous media adaptations include the film *Charly* (1968). SFWA honoured Keyes with its Author Emeritus life achievement award in 2006. His last published book was *The Asylum Prophecies* (2009).

Jay Lake (1964–2014), US author of the popular 'Mainspring' and 'Green' sf sequences plus many short stories, and editor with Deborah Layne of the *Polyphony* anthologies, died on 1 June from the cancer that had besieged him since 2008; he was 49. He won the

2004 John W. Campbell Award for best new writer.

Philippa C. (Pip) Maddern (1952–2014), Australian author and academic much admired for a number of stories beginning with 'The Ins and Outs of the Hadhya City-State' (1976 *The Altered I*), died on 16 June.

Tony Palladino (1930–2014), US illustrator and graphic designer who created the distinctive fractured typographic title for *Psycho* (both Robert Bloch's book and the Hitchcock film posters), died on 14 May aged 84.

Mary Rodgers (1931–2014), author of the popular children's fantasy of identity exchange *Freaky Friday* (1972; twice filmed, 1976 and 2003) and its sequels, died on 26 June; she was 83.

Mary Stewart (1916–2014), UK author most famed for her Arthurian 'Merlin Trilogy' – *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973) and *The Last Enchantment* (1979) – died on 10 May; she was 97.

Patrick Woodroffe (1940–2014), UK artist whose work appeared on many sf/fantasy book covers – also some music albums – died on 10 May aged 73. He published several art collections, plus quirky self-illustrated stories like *The Dorboot of Vacuo* and *The Second Earth: The Pentateuch Re-Told* (both 1987).

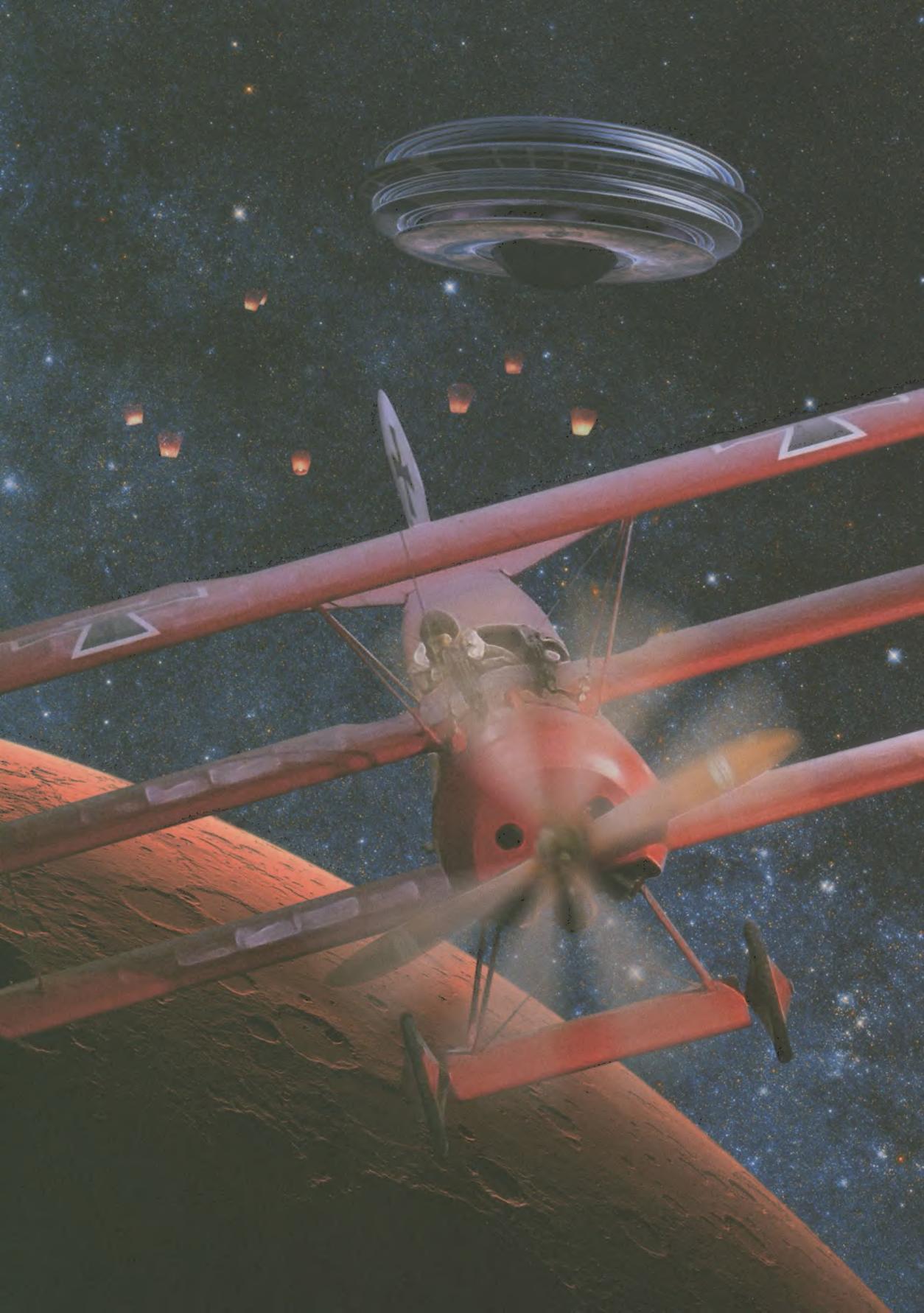
Herbert Yellin (1935–2014), whose Lord John Press (founded 1978) published signed, limited editions of modern authors including Ursula K. Le Guin, Stephen King, Dan Simmons and Ray Bradbury, died on 13 June aged 79.

MY FATHER AND THE MARTIAN MOON MAIDS

JAMES VAN PELT

When I was six, Dad showed me the UFO detector he'd built in his closet.

"UFOs generate powerful magnetic fields," he said. Hanging from the inside wall, out of sight, he'd suspended a four-foot long, slender metal rod. It swung freely from a pivot at the top, and at the other end, a small magnet quivered between two electrical contacts. He gave the rod a light touch, moving the magnet against a contact. A buzzer, mounted beside the device, hummed abruptly. I covered my ears.



"When a UFO moves within range, the magnet will complete the circuit and alert me."

I looked at the simple arrangement and loved my father even more. My dad knew that UFOs existed and that they might visit us at any time.

He looked at me seriously. "Don't mention this to anyone."

I imagined he thought one of our neighbors might be an alien, or that there could be an alien agent in my first grade class. Later, when I'd begun to question if he was right about anything, I decided it was because he thought people might think he was crazy.

He did become crazy, fifty years later, surrendering to Alzheimer's in the assisted living center.

He'd been there almost six months when I made one of my periodic visits. I wished I could see him more often, but I lived on the other side of the state. The knowledge that my sisters lived in town and dropped in almost daily made me feel only a little better.

"The clowns handed out candy," Dad said, "at the parade."

He slumped back in his chair, a bit of today's lunch clinging to his shirt.

"What parade, Dad?" In the hallway, a nurse walked by, her heels clicking against the tile.

"They played music," he said, looking at me and then away, like he suddenly wasn't sure.

My sister, sitting next to him on the bed, shrugged her shoulders.

He scratched behind his ear, something he'd been doing more and more over the last year. "Yesterday, maybe the day before."

Or it could have been eighty years ago, when he was six.

"We went on a plane ride after, a green biplane." He laughed to himself. "The biplane aces became barnstormers."

"Sure, Dad," I said. "Do you want more applesauce?"

"I wore goggles." He made circles with his thumb and finger on each hand and held them over his eyes, peering at me. "My house was so small."

DAD TOOK ME to see *The Blue Max* when I was twelve. Most of the time we watched science fiction or horror movies on television. When I

was younger, he'd let me stay up for the 10:30 start of SciFiFlix on Friday night or Creature Features on Saturday. Great films when you're eight or nine: *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Forbidden Planet*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *Dracula*, *The Mummy*, and the *Godzilla* films. It seemed like we could always find *Godzilla*.

Every once in a while, a true special occasion, we'd go to the drive-in or a 'sit down' theater.

I loved science fiction, but I found romance in WWI planes.

Dad's arm pressed against mine on the chair's plush armrest. He held an open box of Milkducks loosely in his fingers. I could smell them on his breath as he chewed silently. Popcorn smells too, and spilled pop. The soles of my shoes snapped free from the stickiness when I moved.

On the screen, a biplane waggled its wings. A cloud wisp passed beneath its wheels. Below, so far that details vanished, the ground turned into big squares, like patchwork.

I lived movies. When the plane turned, I leaned with it, thinking about the model planes hanging from my bedroom's ceiling. I didn't have this biplane, the one on the screen. It was German, maybe the Albatros D, a squat, efficient speed demon the Germans introduced at the end of the war. I had Fokker biplanes, some Nieuports and Sopwith Camels, but not this one.

My glasses became goggles. Gloves covered my hands. Against the wind, I checked my guns' trigger again. Somewhere, there were British fighters, but for now I flew alone, the engine's roar pillowing me.

Clouds swallow the sky for a second, surrendering the world to whiteness. Water drops stream from the wires and struts, then I am out again, into the clear. All air. All clouds. All sky, open and mine. Clouds like white islands float around, and I weave between them, the enemy forgotten.

I glimpse him, then lose him, a red flash against the blue. My heart pounds. I've been reading WWI aviation history for months. The knights of the sky. I have my heroes, Rickenbacker, Bishop, McCudden, Fonck. I lie on my bed, hands laced behind my head, studying my model planes. Sometimes I turn off the lights and sweep my flashlight across them like a lonely search light. I

think about their canvas and wood construction, and how they caught fire in the air, tumbling toward the ground. Tracers cutting curved paths. Anti-aircraft explosions. The smell of oil and gas.

And always, above it all, beyond the heroes and ground's pitiful limitations, flies von Richthofen. I dream von Richthofen, and labor for days assembling his complicated plane, trying to keep the wings even, to not smudge his beautiful red craft with glue, to hang him in a place of honor in the room.

I see it again, a red plane that vanishes behind a cloud. Could it be? Is it possible? I will the plane to fly around the cloud, and it turns as I command. Where is it? Did I see it? My heart thumps hard. I grip the velvet colored armrest, leaning forward.

Was he there?

Then, above me, clear as an angel and more holy, the red triplane flies against the blue sky.

"The Red Baron!" I gasp, loud enough that people sitting in front of me turn to look. Someone in the theater laughs, but I don't care. It's the Red Baron.

Dad's hand is on my arm, pressing gently down. I think, was I too loud? Is he warning me to be quiet?

But he's not looking at me. He's leaning forward too, watching the screen.

The Red Baron looks over the cockpit's edge, spots us. His fingers touch his leather-flight helmet.

He salutes us, the Red Baron, and then he banks away, impossibly aloft in his beautiful killing machine.

MOM DIED FOUR days after she checked into the physical therapy center, a separate facility where she was supposed to recover from the back surgery. We had arranged for Dad to be in the room with her during her rehab. He couldn't really take care of himself, and whenever Mom was out of the room, he would become anxious and start looking for her. She couldn't even go to the bathroom without him being outside the door, calling for her. She was eighty-four, weak from previous illnesses, and she'd never responded well to anesthetics. After two days on a ventilator, we agreed with the doctors that

there was no hope, so they disconnected her. Thirty-five minutes later she passed on. Dad sat in a chair by her bed, holding her hand, but he wasn't focused. I'm not sure that he knew what was happening. I hoped he didn't.

We moved Dad to the assisted care center that week. He went straight from the physical therapy facility to the care center without going back to the house. We reasoned that going home would be too hard on him. He wouldn't want to leave, and he couldn't stay.

Within the month, my sisters began cleaning the house, clearing it out, and making it ready for sale. Since I lived almost three hundred miles away, they did all the work. They'd call me to talk about where furniture was going, to ask me what I wanted to keep.

CINDERELLA CITY, THE Denver area's first shopping mall, opened when I was in junior high. It sported a fountain in its central plaza, a huge spray reaching toward the ceiling, falling short, then falling back in a misty clatter.

Dad walked beside me the weekend of the grand opening, taking in the stores, smelling meats and spices grilled in the food court, working our way through the crowds. He was forty, dark-haired, confident.

Girls, hired by the mall, in matching costumes of red blouses and short, silver skirts, reflective as mirrors, mixed with the crowd, handing out promotional flyers from some of the businesses. They'd all dyed their hair an unlikely blue. Background music filled the air.

"They're moon maids," Dad said.

"What?" I said. Lately I'd begun to find girls interesting in a way I never had. One stopped before us, handed Dad a green flyer for Penney's.

"Twenty percent off just this weekend," she said, all smiles and long, tanned legs. She looked at me, and I could feel the blush. She winked with a beautiful brown eye, and, astonished, I watched as she turned away to hand the next shopper an advertisement.

Dad laughed. "See, I told you, a moon maid." Embarrassed, I shrugged. "She's not so special."

"That's where you're wrong." He dropped the Penney's flyer in a trash can. "She's a *Marian* moon maid, a much rarer creature. There

are women, who are wonderful just as they are, moon maids, and then Martian moon maids. You are lucky to see one, and if you play your cards right, you might even talk to one and become her friend. They're like unicorns: you have to be worthy and noble. Martian moon maids have standards, after all."

"So, what is Mom?"

We turned into another broad walkway lined with stores. The color scheme changed from the light pastels we'd been walking through to darker, richer hues, and incense smells replaced the grilled meat.

"Your mom is the Martian moon maid queen, son." He spotted a cart between two stores. "Come on. I'll buy you a pretzel. Have you ever had one with mustard?"

I shook my head doubtfully. A pretzel with mustard?

I've never had a pretzel that good since. And, as far as I can tell, that was the only time he talked to me about women.

That was my sex talk from Dad.

I WANDERED THROUGH the transformed home. Some of the furniture had gone to the care center with Dad. Books sat in boxes in the middle of the floor. Kitchen cupboards were bare, the refrigerator empty. Their bed was gone, so their room seemed strangely large, but I could smell them in it: Dad's Chapstick and cologne. Mom's lotions. And the oddly old smell that people leave when they've grown too old to take care of hygiene like they used to.

I opened Dad's nightstand drawer. He'd built sections into it so the items were neatly organized – fingernail clipper, pencils, television remote, cough drops – all partitioned. In the back cubby, he'd put a pocket notebook. Inside were the dates for rotating the bed's mattress that showed if he'd simply flipped it over, or also swapped the foot for the head. An entry for every four months since he'd bought the mattress in 2005. The book showed the life of the previous mattresses too, and he'd created spaces for flipping the mattress for the next eight years, with places to put a check mark when he'd made the rotation.

Dad loved keeping records. In the glove compartment of the car was a notebook with every

gas and oil change (complete with mileage on that tank of gas) from when he'd bought the car. I found books for cars he'd owned back to 1946 in his desk. In his workshop, he kept records for paintbrushes: purchase date, projects completed, color of paint. Next to his golf clubs he kept a tally of every game he'd played: course yardage, total score, total putts. Taped to the wall beside his flying saucer detector in the closet, I found a list of dates. I guessed they were for when he changed the battery.

When I was eight, Dad took me into his office to show me a chart he'd made. It noted bank deposits from the day I was born and continuing until I was twenty-one, more than twice my current lifetime in the future. "See, here," he said. "Your freshman year of college will be completely paid for. Your sophomore year we'll pay eighty percent, and junior year fifty percent. You'll need to start saving money now to pay the missing percent and your senior year. We will give you a weekly allowance." He brought out another chart. "If you save fifty percent each week, and then get a job during the summer once you turn twelve, you will have college paid for."

I was eight. All I could think about was the fifty percent of that allowance I could spend. In two months I might be able to buy a model plane.

DAD EXERCISED ON his own most of his adult life. He had a copy of the Canadian Air Force's exercise manual, and started his day with pushups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, and stretches. He liked to walk; for years and years he walked to church. Although Mom gained weight, Dad stayed slim. Age reshaped him, though, loosening the skin, redistributing weight. I have a black and white picture of him lying on a boat dock at an Indiana lake when he was twenty. He was built like a bantam boxer.

Now, at eighty-six, it can take him fifteen minutes to walk the 150 feet to the care center's cafeteria. He gets distracted. Forgets he has a destination. Refuses to be rushed. When he has a walker, he'll just pick it up and carry it. Often it appears that he's forgotten how to use it. Several times now the interns at the care center have found him on the floor in the middle of the night, where he has fallen.

Watching him walk is a bit of a nightmare. He's always on the edge of toppling. He shuffles. A stray thread in the carpet might be enough to trip him.

I'm frightened by the rate of change. Six months ago, when Mom had her back surgery, the event that precipitated their move into the care center, Dad and I parked the car in a hospital garage a quarter mile from Mom's room. He walked stairs, sidewalks and corridors without help. He chatted about Mom's progress and my kids.

A friend of mine has terminal cancer. He asked his oncologist how long he had to live. The doctor said, "Your system is compromised. An organ could fail, or an opportunistic infection could set in, like pneumonia. I can't predict catastrophe, but if nothing like that happens, I look at how fast your health is changing. If the change is observable over years, than you have years. If we're seeing change over months, than that is what you have. If the change is observable over days, you have days."

It's only been six months since he walked unaided to see Mom.

THREE IN THE morning. I've been reading *John Carter of Mars* since midnight by the light from my open closet. If I hear footsteps overhead, I'll have time to turn off the light and feign sleep before Mom or Dad realize I'm flouting my bedtime. I'm eleven years old.

The ceiling creaks. I look up from the book. On my dresser and desk, my aquariums bubble gently. I've been trying to breed fancy guppies. Even though the parents' tails are long, flowing and beautiful, all the babies look ordinary. This has been a disappointment.

The back door rattles. That would be Dad. He's obsessive about security. He'd equipped the house with heavy storm doors with two locks on them, and the inner doors also had two locks. He'd check them a couple of times a night. Years later, when he bought a car with a remote lock/unlock key fob, he'd open the front door, unlock the car with the remote, and then relock. A couple of hours later, he'd do it again.

He unlocks the back door. I hear the metallic rattling of keys. He's not coming downstairs, so I return to the book. A half hour later, I realize

he hasn't come back in. What is Dad doing outdoors at 3:30 in the morning?

The third and fifth stair from the bottom creak, so I step long and high over them.

Dad built a telescope before I was born, a ten-inch reflector with a four-foot long barrel. He ground the mirror himself. Mom told me that it had taken months. During the school year, he would schedule a night for my class to come to our house to look at the sky. Last year, my fifth grade class saw Saturn's rings and Jupiter's moons. Mom made hot chocolate in a huge pot on the stove. Kids went out our back door into the yard, steaming mugs of hot chocolate in hand to wait their turn.

There's enough of the moon that I can see Dad standing by his telescope. He's not looking through it. His head is cocked back. He's staring up. I watch him for fifteen minutes before I'm too tired and bored. Back in bed, I open my book. Continue reading.

I think I must have fallen asleep before he came in.

MY SISTERS MADE a box for me at my parents' house, filled with bits of Mom and Dad's life that they thought I would want. I haven't gone through it yet. On top of the stack is a huge, brass telescope that looks like it would be at home on a pirate ship. It's dinged, but the brass feels warm and smooth under my hand. When fully extended, it's longer than my arm.

Underneath the telescope sat a magazine with a familiar cover, the September 1963 *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* with part three of Robert Heinlein's 'Glory Road'. It was the first 'adult' science fiction I'd read. I had been nine. The paper had long ago yellowed, but it smelled like Dad's books.

I'm glad they put the box aside for me. I think I'll make a display for the telescope to hang on my wall at home. Underneath, I'll have a sign made. 'Dad. Watcher of the Skies.'

DAD PICKS AT the skin behind his ear. He's sitting on the chair by the door into his care center apartment. His focus is on the carpet a couple of feet in front of him. His fingers move slowly, rubbing the skin, pulling gently at his

hair. I wonder what he's thinking about, or if he's thinking at all.

I have a theory about Alzheimer's: the brain is traveling, but it's not making a trail. Maybe he's remembering a conversation he had thirty years ago. Maybe he's thinking about orbital mechanics from when he worked for Martin-Marietta. It doesn't matter, really, because he won't connect the next thought with the last one.

Of course, he might not be thinking at all. Maybe his brain is idling, stuck in neutral. I can't tell, and that's frightening. His eyes move sometimes, and he blinks. His lips separate slightly, then press together.

Six months ago, the last time we had a real conversation, he said, "The thing about getting old is that people talk to you, but you can't follow what they're saying."

When I leave the care center now, I always tell Dad that I love him. I don't remember telling him that when I was a kid. I hug him – his shoulders are frail, like bird wings. His breath has gone bad. I wonder if he's brushing regularly.

Sometime in my early forties, I noticed that Dad and I never said "I love you" to each other. It might have been around the time his mother died that it occurred to me. I talked to him on the phone. He'd gone back to Indiana for the service. I wanted to offer some comfort, but I didn't know what to say to him. He sounded business-like on the phone. "I'll be home in two days," he said, no hint of loss in his voice.

"I'm sorry about grandma," I said. "I love you."

"She was gone for a long time before she died," he said. It had been a decade since she'd recognized him last.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"Well," he said, "it wasn't unexpected."

After he hung up, I realized he hadn't said that he loved me. For a long time after, I made it a point to say "I love you" when I talked to him on the phone, but he didn't say it back for years.

WHEN I WAS fourteen, Dad and I created a UFO sighting. We didn't mean to. For a couple of months, we'd been experimenting with hot air balloons. Dad had found a pattern for them in *Mechanics Illustrated*, and I did the assembling. We cut the panels from a roll of tissue paper,

then glued the edges together to create increasingly larger balloons. Dad made a launching station out of a three-foot section of one-foot in diameter, aluminum air duct he mounted on a stand. For the bottom, he shaped a pad from fiberglass ceiling insulation that he soaked in oil and gasoline. We launched several balloons this way that would fill with the hot smoke and rise fifty feet. The balloons didn't last long. Anything would rip them, and the heat source sometimes threw sparks that set the balloon afire before it cleared the launch pad, but we persevered.

Finally, our largest balloon was ready: a nine-foot tall monster that had taken me two weekends to assemble. We waited for the breezes to calm as they frequently did near sunset, filled the balloon, and then let it go. It wafted noiselessly upward, out of our back yard, over the house, and continued to rise. We'd never done a balloon this large! A wind current we couldn't feel carried it away, and it occurred to us that a balloon this large might be a hazard. What if it came down on someone's windshield!

We rushed to the car, but the wind carried the balloon across blocks. By the time we backed out of the driveway, it was already several streets away, and it was difficult to see from the car. We lost it, and all we could hope for is that it came down harmlessly somewhere, or was stuck in a tree. We joked that we had discovered a new way to toilet-paper someone's house.

The next day, though, the local paper reported a series of UFO sightings. Numerous people reported a large object hovering over the town at sunset. We looked for where the witnesses lived, and they were all east of us. They'd seen our balloon, lit by the setting sun behind it, glowing in an orange light, numinous and stately, and, evidently, otherworldly.

"WE DON'T BELIEVE he's a flight risk," said Shelly, the care center's director, "but we have found him wandering at night a couple of times."

My sisters and I look at each other around the round table tucked in the corner of Shelly's office. We're having a status check meeting. The care center takes notes about the resident's needs and behaviors, and the family brings any con-

cerns they have. It's humane and gentle, but it's hard to think about making decisions for Dad because he can't make them for himself.

I smiled at the phrase 'flight risk'. At the pace he walked now, I could spot him thirty minutes and he wouldn't be out of sight.

I'd talked to him before the meeting. It had been a good morning for him. More connected, although 'connected' now meant that he would stay on script longer.

"How are you doing?" he'd say. He rested one hand on top the other, his skin so frail I thought I should be able to see the nerves and veins beneath.

"Just fine, Dad."

"And your boys?"

"Fine too."

"Pretty good weather we've been having."

"Yes, I think so too."

But if I wandered off the script, like asking him about the food, or if he'd made friends at the center, he'd say, "I don't know. Guess I haven't thought about it."

Shelly said, "Last night, he made it to the doors to the Memory Support Center. They're locked, of course, so he couldn't have gone in, but he had to pass several people to get there. None of them saw him." She laughed. Shelly's a slender woman, dark hair, dressed in a brown pant suit. When we'd met, she'd told me that before she took the job in the center, she'd been a middle school English teacher. We talked shop for a little bit, but like all English teachers, we ended up discussing how time consuming grading was. "I don't miss that," she'd said. "The residents don't write papers."

"What about the outside doors?" I said. I had a vision of him pushing through them, into the night, wandering down the street.

"Locked and alarmed. A receptionist mans the front desk by the doors twenty-four hours a day. We are very conscious of resident safety."

I think it's interesting that none of the employees in the care center call their wards 'patients', which is how I think of them. The first day I'd visited the center, I passed a very old woman tucked in a couch. She was almost on her back, her chin pressed to her chest. She said so silently I nearly missed it, "Help me."

I told an intern, and within seconds three of them were bending over her.

I wondered what was wrong. How long had she been like that, unable to speak loud enough for anyone to hear?

Near the front doors of the center is a beautifully burnished maple dresser. Fresh flowers in a vase grace the top. On either side of the flowers stand a framed photograph of a care center resident. Old, very old, but well-dressed and smiling for the camera. I'd been to the center several times before I realized each was a photograph of the latest person to die. 'With fondest thoughts, we celebrate Elizabeth Donner', read the brass plaque on the frame's bottom. '1928-2014'.

I can't remember seeing the same photograph twice, and there are only ever two portraits. I suppose on a bad day, someone's memorial might be on the dresser for an hour or two before the next one replaces it.

The care center is a way station, a train platform with nice bedrooms and compassionate attendants. I know the whole circle of life narrative. I'm not denying death, but underneath the friendly wallpaper and shiny dining area furniture and spotless glass I feel the cold fingers waiting to reach out. My dad is here.

"Many of our Alzheimer's patients are nomadic," said Shelly. "Sometimes they'll sleep twenty hours a day, but we don't know which twenty."

"Dad never slept through the night," said one of my sisters.

I thought about Dad at the telescope. Naturally, he wouldn't sleep at night. There were stars to see.

Someone said, I don't know who, "Maybe he's looking for Mom."

A breath caught in my throat, and I realized I was almost crying.

We talked for another half hour. Since I was in town, I could be more helpful. I would take Dad to his doctor's appointment the next day instead of one of my sisters.

DAD NEEDED HELP into the car. I'd been maneuvering him from his room in the care center to the passenger pick up and drop off area for twenty minutes. He paused for a long time at the front doors, as if he didn't know what to make of

the sunlight. I hadn't been able to get him to use the walker, so I'd gripped his pipe-stem thin arm the whole way.

He fastened the seat belt on the third try. "39 Ford," he said. "Great car but it didn't have a rumble seat."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about. My mind was on other matters, though. I would take Dad to and from his appointment, then I'd drive home, but I'd forgotten the box with the telescope my sisters left for me. Dad's house was not on my way home. We'd have time to swing by the house before the appointment, but it would be the first time he's been home since before Mom died. Most of the furniture was gone. Bookshelves were empty. Would he recognize it?

Fifteen minutes later, we pulled into the old driveway of the house my Mom and Dad spent sixty years of their marriage in. I'd grown up in this house. In a month or two, if our plans went well, it would be sold, and another family would be living there.

I tried not to think of that.

"I need to grab something, Dad. Will you be okay?"

He unbuckled his belt. I had assumed he

would stay in the car. That would be easier, but he already opened the door. I rushed around the front of the car to help him.

Inside, he sat on a folding chair that was the only furniture left on the living room's hardwood floor. The drapes were closed, shrouding the room in twilight. At the care center, when he wasn't sleeping, he sat. He'd never fallen while sitting, so I knew he would be okay to leave alone.

I went downstairs to get the box.

It didn't weigh much. Before I turned off the lights in the basement, I looked around. My bedroom had been down here. It looked different without my parents' photographs on the wall, without the interruption of couch and table. It was unlikely I'd ever see the basement again. Maybe some other little boy or girl would use the bedroom. Maybe they too would stay up late, reading by the closet light. For a second, I thought about leaving the old science fiction magazine. What would someone else's child think of part three of 'Glory Road'?

In the background, something buzzed. At first I thought it might be the furnace, but it came from upstairs. It wasn't the door bell or a telephone, but it was incessant and familiar. I cocked

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my head to the side to hear better as I walked up the stairs.

The sound came from the back of the house upstairs, from the bedrooms. Dad wasn't in the chair by the door, though. I almost dropped the box as I put it on the floor.

"Dad?"

I went down the hall, glanced in his empty office, checked the bathroom and the guest bedroom. Nothing.

His bedroom was empty too. The buzzing came from the closet and filled the room.

It was Dad's UFO detector, still in working order after all these years. I moved the magnet off the contacts, cutting off the sound.

Where was Dad?

I double checked the rooms on the way out.

"Dad?"

Out the front door. He wasn't in the car. I rushed to the street. Looked both ways. The sidewalks were empty.

In the next hour, I called the police. I called my sisters. I drove the blocks, slowly, windows down, looking at porch chairs and front yard swings. How could he get so far? Where could he be?

It's dusk now. He's been gone for four hours.

I've answered a thousand questions. I've cried. I've been wracked with guilt. Now, though, for the moment, the house is quiet again. Everyone is outside, somewhere, searching.

I'm looking at Dad's UFO detector, thinking about Martian moon maids and their queen. Dad introduced me to science fiction and telescopes and the stars.

It seemed fantastic, but his UFO detector had gone off.

For just a second, a tiny instant, I wanted to believe that maybe there was an alternate explanation. He wasn't just a wandering Alzheimer's patient.

He wasn't.

James Van Pelt's father introduced him to science fiction movies at a young age, starting with *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and the *Godzilla* films, and the rest of the best of the 50s. James sold his first short story in 1989, and since then has produced four collections and one novel. Besides *Interzone* – most recently issue #248 – his work has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and numerous other venues. He has been a finalist for the Nebula and the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. He occasionally blogs at jimvanpelt.livejournal.com and can be found on Facebook.

BLACK STATIC



ILLUSTRATED BY DANIEL C. HSIEH & W. BAILEY

FLYTRAP

ANDREW HOOK



WHEN ADAMSON WAS A BOY HE IMAGINED A PLANET.

Days were dreamt in visual soliloquies, quiet monologues. He pieced together a harsh, barren, dangerous world from what he knew of the extremities of conditions on Earth. Volcanoes pepper-potted the surface, craters pock-marked its face. The atmosphere suffocated.

The night sky yielded the products of his imaginings. With head tilted back he gazed through his open casement window, each star a possible creation, each pinprick an aspiration. Adamson scorned the astrological books that his parents bought on special occasions, he didn't want to understand the universe through second-hand knowledge: he wanted to experience it directly.

What made the human race different from the other species was that it sought not only to live within its surroundings, but to adapt them, to expand knowledge beyond necessity, to live outside its means.

Adamson had a special fondness for the brightest light in the night sky. He imagined darkness fell infrequently, that its radiance came from silver-suited occupants who braved the surface and were reflected back into the blackness as a message. He wanted this to be a truism. Adamson was lonely on Earth. He felt there were few people like him. If only he had known he was just a typical teenager who would live an average life and see all his dreams shattered, then maybe his perspective would have shifted.

Gareth pinched the fly between his thumb and forefinger. Movement was felt rather than seen, a tremulous vibration resonated within the grooves of his fingerprints and made him want to rub those digits together, to erase the beating of that eloquent heart. Yet instead he maintained the grip, dropped the insect into the jaws of his Venus flytrap.

It bounced once against the plant's interior, then unfolded its squashed wings like an escapist freeing itself from a sticky straightjacket

before rising and buzzing vehemently against the windowpane, catching a breeze and drifting to freedom.

Gareth sighed. He pressed the point of his pencil hard against the paper where he recorded his experiments and made a mark. The fly had been too fast. The trap would only spring when prey had contact with one of the three hair-like trichomes on the upper surface of the terminal lobes. Even then the hair had to be touched twice in quick succession – or two trigger hairs touched within twenty seconds of each other – for it to work. It was a delicate mechanism; but it was also deadly. The trap would shut within a tenth of a second under the right circumstances.

He found the entire process fascinating.

The *Venus* part of the plant's name was a misnomer. It didn't come from Venus. Gareth did, although he didn't know it. Both the planet and the plant had been named after the Roman goddess of love and beauty. The flytrap had been historically known as a *tipitiwitchet*, a possibly oblique reference to its resemblance to female genitalia.

Gareth didn't know enough about female genitalia to make that comparison.

Beth put down her copy of Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* and shuddered. She had seen all four movie versions, the black and white classic directed by Don Siegel, the much-lauded remake featuring Donald Sutherland, the passable 1993 version directed by Abel Ferrara, and the execrable *The Invasion* made in 2007; yet it was the book which got under her skin.

There was something about the simplicity: of the idea, of the telling, of the plot, of the invasion. It resonated tiny triggers inside her body; goosebumped the skin like hairs stood to attention. It felt *familiar*, somehow. As though it had already happened and Finney was only setting out the facts for future generations to discover and find truth in it.

She arced herself back on the bed, looked upside-down out the window. The stars were in a reverse hemisphere, but not the opposing hemisphere of the Australasian states. She could still identify the three stars of Orion's belt, the distinctive shape of the Plough, and the bright 'star' that was Venus. She looked for a long time at the planet, until closing her eye she found the after-image remained on her retina, as though behind her eyelid was a pinhole camera.

She imagined Finney's pods blowing through space and landing on Venus many millions of years ago, sucking the life out of the occupants there, and then leaving it desolate before heading to Earth.

She picked up her phone. It was only just past ten. Laura would be awake. With one push, eleven digits were dialled.

"Hello?"

"It's Beth."

"I know. What do you want?"

"Just tell me something."

"Tell you something...?"

It was a game they had. The recipient of the question would make something up; often nonsense. Beth didn't listen to Laura's words, but she listened to *Laura*. She wondered if she would detect if Laura had been replaced by an emotionless being. If everything that made Laura human remained, or whether it had been subverted. She listened especially to Laura's vowels, because she considered they would be the first to go. Not the staccato consonants, but the resonant vowels.

But Laura's vowels were just as they should be.

Adamson grew older and realised that all planets already existed before he imagined them.

He was only at the centre of his personal solar system.

The sense of isolation remained. It carried through his high school years and into adulthood, where, despite on the surface he hit each of the expected social landmarks at the right time, he found at the age of forty-seven that he could look at his wife and three children and not recognise anything of himself in them.

On nights where the rota dictated that he walk the dog, he took to the hills. Above him, the evening sky fought light pollution revealing

its majesty. Unleashing the Labrador he looked upwards, basked in the glow. Unlike the constellations which beckoned with promise he knew many of these were dead stars. Their brilliance long extinguished, with the light itself no greater than a memory of it. He fished a cigarette out of his pocket, having taken it from the packet before he left the house. The slender stem had buckled and needed gentle pressure from his fingers to restore its shape.

He saw himself as the bent cigarette.

Venus might be the brightest star in the sky, but he now understood that it wasn't populated by those silver-suited beings of his youth. Atmospheric pressure ninety-two times that of Earth, a temperature that made it the hottest planet in the solar system and air that was 96% carbon dioxide put paid to that. He lit the tip of his cigarette, sucked the smoke into his lungs. For a moment they felt like the hottest part of his body, his chest tightened, he blew out carbon like a world-builder.

What he had looked for in the stars and planets wasn't reflected on the ground. He had barely discovered Earth. So it was that dreams were more than snatched, they were stolen.

The dog barked. Adamson paid it no attention. Then it yelped.

He drew the cigarette down by half, threw the butt to the ground, and pressed the remainder into the wet soil with the toe of his shoe.

Then he wandered off into the darkness to find his pet.

Gareth found spiders more suitable than flies. Their longer legs triggered the flytrap's mechanism much quicker than something airborne. Beetles also provided sustenance. He would watch as the trap closed, the interlocking lobes becoming prison bars. From experiments he knew smaller insects could escape through the gap, possibly the plant's intention. He imagined the cost of capturing small prey exceeded the benefits of digesting it. But for the larger insects, those that struggled, the trap tightened. Digestion took ten days, after which the trap reopened and Gareth removed the husk of chitin and placed it in a box.

Despite his inexperience he likened the trapping mechanism to a woman. The male an inno-

cent insect, the colourful interior a woman's promise; the trap was life.

Gareth never intended to become trapped.

If Venus were a goddess then she didn't have man's interests at heart.

Still, his tending the plants, his monitoring of their behaviour, his decision how and when to feed: all these elements represented his control. A pyrrhic victory.

Occasionally he dreamt of falling into a giant flytrap, the surface spongy with the texture of a tongue. Knowing it was useless, he would trampoline bounce in an attempt to rise above the closing mesh. Yet it never worked and he knew he would be digested before he starved.

On those occasions he woke and saw the silhouettes of his plants on the windowsill and waited until he could be sure they hadn't moved.

Gareth was no fan of *The Little Shop of Horrors*.

Beth read other books but always returned to *Body Snatchers*.

In Finney's work the seed pods drifted through millennia until they reached a planet they might colonise. They affected the guise of the inhabitants although the science itself was sketchy as to how this osmosis might occur. Whatever you do, don't sleep! Unlike the films the book made it clear that the lifespan of these amalgamate creatures was greatly shortened once the transformation had taken place. Five years at the most. Five years to remain in that state – being who you were but not who you were – until disintegration.

Upon which the alien life-form would move on. She raised this speculation with Laura.

"Tell me something..."

Laura's expression was blank, she began to speak slowly, emotionlessly, until a smile broke her face and she collapsed into giggles.

"Idiot!"

"Scared you, did I?"

"Of course not!"

But wouldn't it be the case, Beth thought, that if an alien were to replace a human they would exhibit the necessary traits required to survive. Finney's book was fiction, but the boundaries set by the book wouldn't occur in reality, would they? If Laura were replaced might she not simply be Laura by any other name.

It was when Beth had these thoughts that she understood her interest had shifted into obsession.

"Boy?"

Adamson never called his Labrador by its given name, because he hadn't named it.

In his mind the name wasn't something suitable to be calling on a hill top whether it was light or dark.

He didn't see it return. A soft form ran around the outside of his right leg and a cold nose nudged the fingers of that hand. Adamson dropped to his knees and held the dog's head within his palms. It didn't shirk, didn't acquiesce to his master's touch. It didn't look frightened or spooked but Adamson knew that it had been.

He clipped the leash, thought about another cigarette. Thought of his wife and children at home in the warmth in front of the television.

There was nothing worth watching.

There was never anything worth watching.

He walked in the direction that the dog had returned from. Night hid objects in the darkness. A rock pushed part of one toenail a fraction further under his skin and his swearing formed part of the soundtrack of that instance.

Up ahead a dark shape, possibly a bigger rock, merged into the surrounding blackness like a smudge on a charcoal drawing.

When he reached it the leash he was holding strained and sprang from his fingers. He looked back at the receding golden coat that resembled a blinked out light, and then turned back to the object.

Before he examined it he looked at the sky.

If there was a difference he didn't see it.

He reached out a hand and touched the surface. It wasn't stone.

Gareth knew humans were composite bodies, made of trillions of cells. Some of those cells had been discovered to work independently of the host. Mitochondria, for example, had its own DNA. Yet the differences between life's building blocks were almost infinitesimal. When you really thought about it, life astonished.

Sometimes he ran a fingertip across the tripwires at the heart of the flytrap. When the sub-

terfuge worked, the closed trap took twelve hours to reopen.

He imagined these fake meals must really annoy the plants.

Not that they had feelings.

Feelings were overrated, in any event.

As a boy he had imagined Venus flytraps were linked to the eponymous planet. They certainly appeared to be an alien species.

Not that he could imagine what an alien species might look like.

In a school encyclopaedia he remembered seeing a drawing of a human flanked by two creatures supposedly from planets of differing gravity. One was tall and thin, the other short and fat. The short and fat specimen was marked as a possible inhabitant of Venus.

Should the Venusians exist.

He had doubted the veracity of the speculation without any of the knowledge of what he was.

It would turn out to be correct.

“Tell me something...”

“This is getting boring.”

Beth sighed. Laura was becoming less and less the person she thought she knew.

People changed, didn’t they? It didn’t require an alien visitation for that to occur, they changed naturally. Their emotions fluctuated dependent on external circumstances, their cells degenerated, they were open to other influences and ran with them. What was once funny could be poignant after a disaster. What was a disaster could often become funny. Sometimes only moments after it occurred.

And Laura’s distance heightened Beth’s wish for change. If only something might happen which would *bond* them again. Best friends forever, that was what their necklaces said. Her mother had told her to grow up, but she *was* fully grown. Wasn’t a childhood retreat comforting anyway, like returning to the womb?

Sometimes she wanted a return to the womb.

Sometimes she wanted the whole of humankind to return to the womb.

Laura had got a job in the centre of town. Beth rode the bus with her, to support her on the first day. It had been a while since she had ridden a bus. She looked at the faces of each of the pas-

sengers as they boarded, none of them smiling. The bus was an elongated coffin, taking them all to their deaths. Or maybe it was one of Finney’s pods, adapted because of its time spent on Earth.

But these passengers had already been changed beyond the people they believed they were going to be in their youth.

Beth didn’t want to be one of them.

She wanted to continue in life as she was.

.....
Adamson wasn’t sure if it was his hand which was warm or whether it was the object.

He pulled out his mobile phone. There was a torch function which he used when getting behind the TV to change the SCART from the DVD player back to the television. His wife always sighed as he did this, but she never got up to do it herself. The light ran the battery down quick.

The shape was split in two, resembling a halved coconut. Adamson ran his hand around the outside. Could he describe it as hair? Fur? No, neither. The object’s interior was smooth.

He would fit inside it, he realised, with a jolt.

At the same time he knew he *would* step inside it.

He had been going to step inside it all along.

Wistfully he looked back to where the animal had been.

He put down the mobile phone, leaving the light switched on. Then he removed his shoes and socks. Placed his socks inside the shoes. He unbuttoned his belt, undid the button at the top of his jeans, slid them down his legs and stepped out of them. Folded them beside his shoes. This was followed by his jacket, jumper, T-shirt.

Naked, he stepped inside the object and the sides closed around him like a blink of an eye in the blink of an eye.

It was even darker in the pod than it had been outside it. But Adamson knew there would be light.

When the pod re-opened and the body stepped out of it and re-dressed, Adamson’s core was already returning to Venus.

.....
Gareth met her at the garden centre. A few years younger, but a few years wiser. She was looking at the sundews.

They weren't common. But after Gareth had expressed his interest in carnivorous plants the owner had bought a few in.

She was tall, with long black hair and a red gash where her lips should be.

He couldn't help himself.

"The sundews, less commonly known by their Latin name of *Drosera*, are so called because of the shiny drops of mucilage at the tip of each tentacle reminiscent of morning dew."

She turned and smiled. "I know," she said. Then she said: "Do you know why you're drawn to the flytraps, Gareth?"

And then she said: "It's all in the name."

Gareth felt as if a button had been pushed in the back of his head. Enlightenment.

"It's time to go," she said. "Time to move on."

She reached for his hand and he took it; half in, half out of himself. He felt like a millstone that grinds against another millstone when there is nothing between them to grind.

He got in her car with barely a passing thought about his.

Her legs were as bare and as light as ice lolly sticks.

Gareth smiled. In the language of humans only a vowel separated a plant from a planet.

And it was time for separation.

Change.

"Change is only natural," Laura said. "Don't you think so, Beth?"

You're becoming something you shouldn't be, thought Beth. *You're dumbing down.*

The bus stopped and they both got off. For a while they walked in silence up the High Street, their long friendship threadbare, coming apart at the seams.

"This is where we part," Laura said, pointing to the large glass façade of the office block where individuality, creativity and independence were culled on a daily basis. She looked excited, but the glint in her eye was temporary; she was in for the long haul.

Beth stepped back. She took a look at her life, speculated her future. Laura's future was not for her. She didn't want the end of the road, with a terraced house and an average husband and average children watching average television pro-

grammes in an average living room.

She wanted the stars.

They air kissed.

Beth turned to walk back towards the bus stop, then stopped.

What if Finney had got it right, but reversed it. What if he knew but couldn't tell people the truth?

In *The Body Snatchers* human's resisted change because they didn't want to lose their core, the essence of what made them human. Their soul. The replacements were identical but emotionless. That single substance, the enigma which separated humans from other life forms – such as plants – was gone. But what if the reverse were true. What if humans were in fact empty shells and Venusians came to Earth and entered their bodies and everything which was championed as human intelligence was in fact alien. What if how we defined ourselves wasn't us at all. Or in fact, was us; but we had forgotten where we came from?

She looked up at the stars but couldn't see them because it was daytime. *Silly!*

When she returned her gaze to the street and saw the mundanity there – the people no more than insects – she realised she was right. But that the intelligence was ebbing, humankind – the real, bland, unadventurous, frankly lazy humankind – had begun to dominate.

She sighed.

What she would give for her soul to be repatriated.

What she would give to remain herself again.

This is Andrew's first appearance in *Interzone* although he has been published several times in our sister magazine *Black Static*. Stories have recently appeared in *Strange Tales IV*, *Chiral Mad 2*, and the anthology *La Femme*, and will shortly appear in *PostScripts*, the similarly-named Canadian anthology *Postscripts to Darkness*, and *Jupiter SF*. He has edited a collection of punk-inspired stories, *punkPunk!*, for DogHorn Publishing and co-edits *Fur-Lined Ghettos* magazine. Next year should see the publication of *Human Maps*, a short story collection through Eibonvale Press, whilst in the interim he has made available two early short story collections long out of print through Kindle. And his crime novel, *The Immortalists*, was published by Telos earlier this year with a second novel, *Church of Wire*, to follow in 2015. Sometimes he sleeps.

ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN HANFORD

NEIL WILLIAMSON

THE GOLDEN NOSE

FELIX KAPEL believed the sweet smell of success to be that of gold. This was his logic: Gold was the highest standard in the world of finance, and in Felix's own business as a globally respected olfactory specialist, a *nose among noses*, it stood to reason that any person who could discern the subtle smell of gold would rightly have attained the pinnacle of the fragrance world. Gold, Felix imagined, would have an aroma that was cool and warm, bright and mellow. It would be *rich* too of course but, at the same time... Well, it would be pointless to attempt to convey what the smell of gold was *like* because it would be unique.



Felix kept a South African Krugerrand in a velvet-lined box in his desk drawer. On days when business had gone particularly well he took it out, but as successful as he became – and during his career he had been on retainers with Parisian perfumeries and Assam tea producers, the cosmetics divisions of several famous multinationals and every distillery on the Scottish island of Islay – he had yet to detect even a glimmer of that elusive smell.

Now, sitting at breakfast – *linen with not too much detergent, a carbon scrape of toast, the earthy jag of espresso* – he was beginning to think he never would. Not the way the world was heading these days. All the computer modelling, nanoscale particulate sensors, and organic synthesis were pushing craftsmen out. Modernisation, his customers told him regretfully. The push for quality control and molecular copyright couldn't be guaranteed by human abilities alone any more.

Felix snapped shut his ancient laptop, hiding the latest missive of dismissal, and took his coffee to the window. Only a year ago his view had been of elegant Wipplinger Strasse, a quiet street, a block or so from a place that sold the best Kaiserschmarrn in Vienna. The new apartment in Ottakring offered a far poorer vista. Rain-dark and utilitarian, blare and grit. It wasn't a happy change, but finances had forced it. The one thing he hadn't had to compromise on yet was his coffee. He lifted the demitasse and breathed deep, let the aroma cloud about him, fill his passages. He did not waste the experience by drinking it. People who drank good coffee were, in Felix's book, degenerate criminals.

He turned when Joanna entered with the morning's mail and her yipping dog. She dumped most of envelopes on the dining table but retained one, waved it. He knew without looking that it was the revised quote from the decorators.

"I'll look at it later." Bijoux sniffed at his shoes, then looked up expectantly, all brown eyes and pink tongue. He nudged it away with a gentle kick.

"Oh, Felix, it's really not that expensive."

"Later, Joanna."

She stilled. "It's been nearly a year. And we're

still living like this." Dramatically, she thrust out her hand. She could have been pointing anywhere, it wouldn't have mattered. It was all shabby and none of it was chic. "You promised."

He scowled. "And you promised not to let Bijoux into the dining room. He stinks when he's been out in the rain."

Joanna ignored him and sat to butter herself some toast. He rejoined her and flicked through the rest of the mail. Bills mostly. He pushed them aside.

"What's that one from *Gustav & Jacob*?"

Her buttery knife was levelled at a cardboard box. Felix should have recognised the logo of the Czech chocolatiers immediately. He'd consulted on their aromatics for nearly fifteen years, until they too had taken the leap to automation and dispensed with his services.

Felix slit open the box – *hamster cage packaging, sex toy polyurethane* – and scooped out the shredded paper and a padded bag. Inside the bag was an arrangement of white plastic. A moulded respirator cup was attached by a neatly coiled tube to a box. Nestled into the top of the box was an ampule of amber liquid. Next to that was a switch.

The scribble, in English, on the *G&J* compliment slip was from their old production manager, Karel Bilek. Felix had thought he'd retired.

Felix

Good to hear from you before Christmas. If it were up to me I'd have you in like a shot, but you know the way the business is now. I'm truly sorry.

You and I were craftsmen, son, but the world has moved on. Did you know they can record smells now? Not perfectly, but it won't be long.

Do yourself a favour, give these guys a call and offer your services. They'll bite your hand off. Take their schilling for a few years and then enjoy a nice retirement when it comes.

Karel

Underneath Bilek had printed a company name, *Teleroma*, and a Swiss phone number. Felix vaguely recognised the name, but it took a moment to dredge it up. On sufferance, he had been forced to converse via the odious Skype with the makers of a film-star endorsed scent range in the USA, establishing a few details as a matter of formality before closing the contract,

but when he raised the subject of when they wanted him to fly over the young man in the little window had laughed. *No need, Mr Kapel. We can do all of that over the internet with the Teleroma.*

Felix hadn't known what Teleroma was, but he wanted nothing to do with it. He'd politely backed out of the negotiations at the earliest opportunity.

Now, he didn't know whether to be saddened or insulted. It was all right for Karel to talk about resting easy. He already had at least one foot up on the comfy cushions. Felix had fifteen years to fill before he could even consider retirement, and he had difficulty enough keeping Joanna and the dog under this roof let alone putting anything significant by for the future. And besides, while it was nice of Karel to acknowledge his craftsmanship, a little wider recognition would be nice too. By this stage in his career Felix should have been publishing books and giving lecture tours. There was still time left to make his mark, and he wasn't going to throw away the chance of doing so by selling out to the very people who were killing his industry.

Felix crumpled the note in his fist.

"What is it then?" Joanna leaned over his shoulder. That terrible perfume – *crushed roses and children's candy* – that she liked made him gag.

He handed her the apparatus. "See for yourself." With that he stood, dusted the toast crumbs from his lap and strode towards the door.

"Felix!" The urgency in Joanna's voice made him turn. She was holding the box in one hand, the mask in the other hovering in front of a face that was stretched in uncommon delight. "Violets!" She crossed the room, talking. "Is this new? Something you're working on? You clever man." She kissed him on the forehead and pressed the apparatus gently back into his hands. "Clever, clever man."

Once Joanna had breezed out of the room, her smelly little dog trotting after, Felix closed the door and retook his seat. He placed the device on the table, knowing he ought to toss it straight in the bin but now curious. He had shared many examples of his craft with his wife over the years. Some she had liked well enough, others she had

not, but he had never seen her express such delight in a scent before.

Felix pressed the sterile, soft plastic over his nose, closed his eyes, flicked the switch, and inhaled.

"Fuck me," he whispered.

He had smelled violets in many forms over the years – crushed, dried, distilled; violet water, violet powder, violet essence – but none got close to this. This was fresh, living blooms of *V. odorata* growing in a meadow at the height of spring. With his eyes closed even Felix could not have told the difference between this synthesis and the real thing.

He tore the cup from his face, pushed the device away. The movement disturbed the pile of bills, exposing the corner of something he had not spotted earlier. A postcard, plain apart from the inked stamp of the shop that had sent it.

Antikzone

Gerhardt Zickler, proprietor

On the reverse, next to Felix's own address was a handwritten message: *Herr Kapel, we have your item.*

THE SHOP was above a café bar half way to the 12th district. The barman directed him through the partitioned half of the room where smoking students cast him looks that confirmed he was every bit as out of place as he felt. By the time he had crossed the room, the cigarette haze had entirely numbed his sense of smell, but on seeing the piles of mouldering books crowding the wooden stairs, the reaches of necrotic mildew crawling the walls as he climbed, he was grateful.

Herr Zickler, when Felix found the proprietor slouched at a desk at the centre of the maze of lumber like a torpid spider, was a surprise. From the tone of his emails, the sure, unfussy knowledge he had displayed on the Habsburg History site that Felix's ineffectual Googling had led to after reading about the artefact in the Karlheinz Kuntz biography, he had expected tweeds, greying temples, a professorial air. Not this...loafer.

Zickler acknowledged his arrival with a nod, but did not remove his headset or divert his attention from his laptop screen. "Five minutes, Herr Kapel," he said, covering his microphone.

"Raiding on Warcraft. Dungeon boss. Have a look around."

Having no choice in the matter, Felix did as he was bid. He wandered curving aisles of casedment clocks whose complicated faces once told who knew what manner of things in addition to mere time, but now were still and smelled of lacquer and dust. He brushed past rails of military coats pungent with moth balls. Teetering towers of books and sheet music and old documents of all sorts. Plastic tubs of spectacles and opera glasses, watches and hip flasks. Forests of walking sticks.

Old things for which the world no longer had a use.

"What a load of junk," he muttered.

"One man's junk, Herr Kapel." Zickler's beaky countenance appeared between two stacks of pulp science fiction magazines. "Is another's gold?"

Felix reddened, but the proprietor did not appear to have taken offence.

"Come," Zickler said. "I'm printing out your provenance...such that it is."

Felix followed him back to the desk where a printer was spewing a sheaf of papers. "Such that it is?"

Zickler grinned good-humouredly. "As I explained before," he said, "with an artefact like the Nose, there's really no way to prove its veracity. I can tell you where I got it from, and where my vendors got it from, and so on. But there's no way of ascertaining that this is the *real* one. If indeed there ever *was* a real one. The Habsburg Nose is legendary, man. And legends, by their nature..."

"So you can give me no guarantee."

"Absolutely not." Zickler adjusted his glasses. "But I *can* guarantee that it's very old and a lot of people have *believed* it to be the real deal down the years. Including Karlheinz Kuntz in the years before his unfortunate demise." Zickler folded the papers and placed them on top of the unremarkable cardboard box that had replaced his laptop on the desk. "I believe we said eight hundred and fifty."

Felix licked his lips. The money wouldn't have been enough to repaint the entire apartment, but it would have got a couple of rooms done. He

was gambling it on what? A legend? And not just money, his entire career. He needed an edge, was hoping for a miracle. If it didn't work, he'd be out of business within the year.

"Will it really *do* anything?" He was surprised by the plaintiveness in his own voice. "I mean, *really*?"

"Who knows, Herr Kapel." Zickler tapped his nose. "I imagine you're the only man in Vienna who will be able to tell."

TO THE layman, Felix had always believed, real skill, real *art*, should be indistinguishable from magic. What else do you call it when another human being achieves something which, for you, would be impossible?

Karlheinz Kuntz had been a magician. A contemporary of Escoffier in Lucerne and a more than decent chef in his own right, he had been obsessed with the importance of aroma in cooking. *Without smell, he said, your soul is un-nourished. You might as well eat air.* In pursuit of what started as a theory but quickly became an obsession, Kuntz had pioneered blindfolded tastings, then entirely dark restaurants. Towards the end of his life it was said he took to wearing a prosthetic nose made of gold. He died in a sanatorium in 1931 suffering from something called *psychosomatic putrescence*. According to the biography, the physicians had detected nothing physically wrong with the man. He had just wasted away, and near the end he had smelled so rotten the sanatorium staff had to be paid extra even to enter his room. A tragic and ironic fate for such a gifted individual.

Felix didn't open the box in the shop, or in the café downstairs or even on the tram home. While it sat heavy on his lap he distracted himself with Zickler's notes. They filled out the story that he already knew. The material was presented prosaically, but that in itself did much to restore his confidence that he'd done the right thing. He regretted now asking Zickler if the Nose actually worked. Of course it didn't *work*. However, it was a symbol, a talisman that had been owned by renowned olfactory greats over the centuries. The artists, the magicians. After Kuntz the chef had come an orchid grower, an unassailable champion greyhound breeder, a wartime bomb

disposal ace. Before, there had been a spice importer, a rose gardener, a mulberry horticulturist in the court of George III of England. The nose was like a badge of genius that cropped up now and then through history.

The story went that the Nose was made for a military officer close to one of the Viennese archdukes. The Hauptman, known only to history as The Bloodhound, had been famous for his ability to root out seditionists and spies, and the golden prosthetic, which he wore ostensibly to cover the syphilitic ruin of his face, was said to lend him the supernatural power of sniffing out plots against his master before they had even been uttered aloud. An ironically gruesome footnote claimed that the fellow had been murdered on Ottoman orders, his body dumped on an island in the Lobau, but discovered within a day because the stench of the corpse could be smelled from the city. The fate of the Nose was not recorded, but it had appeared a century later in the possession of a successful perfumer. The first links in the chain of ownership that continued now with Felix himself.

The apartment was empty but even so he went into the bathroom and locked the door before, with shaking hands, he unwrapped his prize.

Inside the box was a nest of straw. Buried within the straw, an object wrapped in sheets from a 1982 edition of *El País*. And then it was in his hands. The Golden Nose of the Habsburgs.

The Nose was an exact replica of a human nose, if perhaps a little large. It had a nobbled crook at the bridge and wide nostrils and had a texture that resembled pores. The colour of the gold was soft, dull, *almost* fleshy in tone. It was impressively heavy.

Felix brought the object up to his face and sniffed it, but the Nose did not smell of anything at all. He smiled ruefully. Then he tried it on. For such a heavy object, it was really rather remarkable how well balanced the thing was. How comfortably it sat on his face, even when he took his hands away. How natural it felt, encasing his own nose. Almost as if it wasn't there at all.

Felix looked in the mirror. The nose gleamed in the fluorescent light. When he had imagined this, he had thought it would look clownish, ridiculous, but no. The nose gave him gravi-

tas. The man in the mirror was every inch the authority.

Finally, Felix gave in to curiosity that logic and common sense had been unable to kill, and drew in a full, deep breath.

Well, of course, there was no difference between that breath and the one before. *Does it actually work?* he'd asked Zickler. *Does it actually give you preternatural, magical, olfactory sensitivity? Will you be able to tell the difference between species of tulip from a mile away? Or inform the police what the victim's last meal was from the odour palette of their kitchen? Or tell whether your lover is true from the tang of her sweat?*

Felix laughed at himself. No, there were only the usual smells of the bathroom: soap on the wash stand, bleach from the floor, the slight odour of damp that told him Joanna had showered before she left. He could see the water droplets on the shower curtain, and a rim of mildew around the hem that had really quite a strong taint to it. It almost masked the sting of mint from the dried smear of toothpaste on the sink, and the fulsome guff of sewage seeping from the toilet, the lingering stain of farts too, and the cloying, complex mélange of bathroom dust – talcum powder mixed with flakes of skin and tiny hairs and carpet fibres – and that dog really did stink, she'd been washing him in here, in their shower, that was disgusting, and their neighbours, the vegetarians, well she'd been cooking bacon again after he'd left for work and then doused the place in the most godawful aerosol freshener—

Felix removed the Nose.

And breathed out.

THE EFFECT on Felix's fortunes was immediate. He told no one but Joanna about the Nose, insisting on privacy while he worked, but it was difficult not to associate his ownership of the artefact with the sudden flood of work offers. And that initial flurry was nothing compared to how it got once word of his newfound abilities spread.

In a few short weeks there was enough money to completely redecorate the apartment. Joanna might have been a little more pleased about it,

but her scowl over breakfast had not shifted one bit. Out of sorts, Felix had accidentally kicked the dog, which had taken to following him round, constantly sniffing at his legs and jumping up, and he and his wife had argued. "And give that thing a proper bath outside," he'd yelled as he rushed out to catch the flight to Strasbourg. "It stinks." Her reply had been a petulant mutter, but it had sounded like: *Look who's talking.*

Bernal et fils was a gourmet provisioner. Having started life several generations back as two brothers with adjoining shops, one a *poissonnier*, the other a *volailleur*, their main business now was in procuring expensive comestibles for the elite of Europe. However, they still kept their hand in with a range of home-smoked fish and meats.

"Monsieur Kapel?" The woman's smile was professional, her handshake firm. "Welcome to Bernal. I'm Elodie Meilleroux. Thank you for coming all this way. We really hope you can help us make our mark in the smoked salmon market this winter season."

"My pleasure." Felix smiled too, simply because it was nice to be smiled at for a change. "I'd like to get going right away if that's all right. Although I have to say I still don't understand why you need me for this, don't you have tasting panels?"

"*D'accord.*" As Meilleroux waved him towards a door, she glanced quizzically at the carpet where he had walked. Felix looked too but if there was anything there, he couldn't see what it might be. "Well, that's our problem, you see," she said, holding the door and then following him through. "Our panels can't decide. And to be honest, Monsieur, the company can't afford to get this wrong." She shrugged apologetically then ushered him through another door. "So, we've called in the expert."

Felix was getting used to people saying things like this. It had taken long enough.

"Obviously, I'll do what I can," he said.

"Thank you, Monsieur." Meilleroux beamed and stopped before one more door. "Well, here we are. The room has been prepared as you requested. Spotlessly clean, fragrance-free detergents, no background odours."

"Very good." Again Felix tried to match her smile. "Then I shall get started."

When he raised his hand to push the door, though, she stopped him. She looked embarrassed. "Monsieur, I'm sorry but, have you perhaps stepped in something. There are a lot of dogs in the area..."

"Stepped in something, you mean like—?"

"Oui, *merde*, Monsieur Kapel. Can't you smell it? It's really quite strong."

Kapel shook his head. Without the Nose on, he could smell only the things you'd normally expect to smell in an office building. Sterile carpet, stale recirculated air, a lingering chemical taint of air freshener. Nevertheless, he lifted first one shoe, then the other. His soles were spotless. Meilleroux's brow creased. She checked her own shoes, then she shook her head. "I must be imagining things."

"It's not a problem. The nose sometimes plays tricks on the best of us."

She shrugged again. "I'll let you get to work then. When you're finished, press zero on the phone and ask for me."

The room was empty of everything apart from the table, the sample containers and the clipboard and pen. Felix placed his briefcase on the table and retrieved the velvet-lined box that used to contain his Krugerrand. He took out the Nose, and began his work.

BUSINESS BOomed. Felix travelled constantly, all over Europe, to the Americas and throughout Asia. First class every time. He passed the travelling time writing guest columns for a variety of trade magazines and Sunday supplements and responding to requests to give informative talks. At least to begin with. The columns continued, but the public appearances dried up pretty fast. He tried not to feel personally insulted. Same as when the customers, delighted with his work, nevertheless tried to persuade him not to visit in person in future. *We don't want to inconvenience you. I'm afraid our budget won't stretch. We'll send the samples to you. Don't you use Teleroma?*

He did not, would not, could not use Teleroma. His laptop barely managed email. And besides, he told them: "Why would you buy a greyhound and make it run in shackles?"

Return visits were to deserted parts of build-

ings accompanied by a single green-faced employee. Even though Felix had bathed that morning, was wearing clothes fresh out of the dry cleaner's wrapper, and brand new shoes.

At first he thought it was his imagination, but the evidence mounted. What he had thought at first to be room accorded by the public to a person of obvious status became naked avoidance. People crossed the street to distance themselves from him. Shop keepers asked him not very politely to leave. Children jeered, or cried.

He thought of Karlheinz Kuntz. Of *psychosomatic putrescence*. Well, what else could it be? He was sure he gave off no particular smell – he of all people would detect one, surely – but everyone he came into contact with acted like he was the skunk from those old cartoons.

Even Joanna was sleeping in a room at the opposite end of the apartment now. The only person who enjoyed Felix's company these days was Bijoux. When he came home, the little bastard was waiting at the door to snuffle at his ankles, happily licking its chops.

Joanna was sitting in the kitchen typing on her computer. When she saw him she looked cross, then guilty, then nauseated. Like the rest of the flat, the kitchen was full of fresh cut flowers and the windows were wide open.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were in..." She trailed off because he knew she had long since ceased to care where his travels took him as long as it was out of the house.

"Change of plan," he said. "I'm conducting a telephone interview with *Spice! Magazine*."

Joanna sneered. "Oh, they're not coming to do it in person? I wonder why."

"Well, the drains..."

"It's not the *drains*, Felix. Have you seen the doctor again?"

"He maintains there's nothing wrong with me a good bath won't fix. And he won't let me make another appointment."

Joanna *hmphed*. "There's another letter from the landlord. The neighbours have got a petition together. It's got nearly four hundred names. Who would have thought your fame would have spread so far?"

Felix took a step towards her. "Joanna..." But she held up a hand, so he sat meekly at the oppo-

site end of the table. "What are we going to do?"

"Perhaps you could consider getting rid of that bloody *thing*?"

It wasn't the first time she'd mentioned it, and he'd promised to think about it...but he knew in his heart he couldn't. The Nose made him who he was. It completed him in a way she could never understand. He made no reply.

"Well, I know what I'm going to do." She closed her computer and came around the table where she hovered for a moment, perhaps considering touching his cheek, even kissing his brow like she used to, but her face blanched. "It's all in the email," she said as she rushed from the room. Moments later Felix heard the delicate sounds of retching from the bathroom.

Felix made coffee. Quadruple strength. The warm aroma from the cracked African beans filled the room, welcoming and lovely and surely stronger than any imaginary odour. He made two cups. Both went untouched.

These were the sounds of her leaving: The busyness of bottles and jars in the bathroom, the firm shutting of the bedroom door followed so quickly by its re-opening that he knew she must already have been all but packed, the rumble of case castors, the whispered imprecations to the bloody dog, the beep of the taxi horn. The slam of the door.

Felix counted one minute, then another, calling her bluff and waiting for the sound of her return, but the only thing he heard was his own voice and that only emphasised her absence.

He stopped counting and walked the length of the empty apartment to his office. Bijoux was there, gleefully humping his laptop. The casing was gnawed and covered in saliva.

"Bijoux!" The dog perked as soon as it saw him, tripping itself in its haste to scurry over. He lifted it up. It got a couple of licks in at his face before he stretched it to arms' length. "So she abandoned you too?" The dog gave no reply, but seemed happy enough with the situation. It certainly smelled as if it had just farted with delight. "To be honest, I'm not surprised," he told it. "You're an obnoxious little bastard." And, with rare physical dexterity, he calmly drop-kicked the ball of fur through the open window.

Felix went through the flat with a refuse sack,

shoving the flowers and air fresheners and bloody scented candles into bags, closing and locking the windows, drawing the curtains. Then, when he was ready to find out her reasons, he returned to his office and switched on his laptop: *hot metal, burning plastic, wisps of toxic smoke.*

With a bellow of rage he reopened the window and tossed the computer after the dog.

IT TOOK three days before he gave in. On the first day he went to the kitchen and made a wonderful-smelling meal out of all the things that Joanna didn't like. Not so much out of defiance, or even because he was hungry, but because on that side of the apartment he could barely hear Bijoux's howls. The dog was unharmed, just pissed off. The laptop had not fared so well. On the second day, both dog and wrecked device were gone. Felix threw himself into work, or at least tried to. Every phone call was met with excuses. They even seemed to object to talking to him, as if merely the sound of his voice conjured the imaginary smell. *All of this could easily have been discussed by email*, one customer said. *It'd have been so much more convenient if only you would use Teleroma.*

That night he went to Joanna's bedroom and donned the Nose to see what lingered: *sickly perfume, unlaundered sheets, the musk of sex that hadn't involved Felix.* Then he looked at himself in her mirror.

"Look at you," he said. "You're a master of your profession, and yet no one will have anything to do with you. You could still get by if you weren't so afraid of the future."

"You're right," he replied to himself. "If the old world doesn't want me, perhaps after all I can make a place for myself in the new one. How bad can it be, really?"

He really had no option.

On the third day Felix went to an electronics store and asked for their top-of-the-range computer. Pretending not to notice the fleeing customers, he cornered the clerk who had been slowest to escape. The girl rattled through the features in a blur of words. Felix cut her off. "Teleroma."

She nodded, swallowed. "Comes as standard

on all new models, sir."

"I'll take it."

Pink relief coloured her pallid cheeks. She told him how much it cost.

Just because he was feeling spiteful at the world, he said: "I want a discount. Otherwise I'll have to have a good look around."

FELIX WROTE that afternoon to those clients with whom he still had some tenuous relationship and informed them that he might after all in some circumstances be willing to work remotely using the Teleroma service. He intended to spend the subsequent hour learning how Teleroma worked but the help document bewildered him and the number of results to his Google search for something simpler was so bewildering that he only got as far as understanding two things. Firstly, that Teleroma was a mechanism for transmitting scent over the internet, which he'd already surmised. And secondly that it was hugely popular. People used it for everything: cookery videos, perfume advertisements, porn. He scowled at the little grill in the laptop casing, his finger poised to click play on a coffee ad, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Outside, the sound of people laughing passed and faded. The bark of a distant dog made him wonder where Bijoux was. His apartment was still and silent.

Occasionally the phone rang, but after the third call from a newspaper wanting to talk to the *incredible stinking man*, he switched it off.

Going through his emails, Felix discovered an invitation to join a dating site. He stared at it. Even he knew better than to click on unsolicited links. But this one was personally addressed, and very welcoming. He stared some more, and then he clicked on it. What was the worst that could happen? The site offered him a bunch of forms. It took some time to list all of his achievements before his application was ready to send off.

He had a reply within the hour. Her name was Ania, and she was Polish. In the subsequent exchange of emails, she came across as cultured, understanding and not lacking in humour. When she asked if he would like to Skype, he cringed but in for a penny... Besides, he was still

handsome, and he had no intention whatsoever of switching on the Teleroma, even if he was able to work out how.

Ania had a strong face, a broad mouth with nice teeth when she smiled, which was often, and a sexy nose. Could a nose be sexy? Hers was. It had very wide nostrils. She was a partner in an accountancy firm. She worked late and was divorced. In what little free time she had she drank vodka and torrented HBO shows and chatted to men from dating sites. She winked when she said that.

Felix didn't know what torrenting was. He didn't understand the wink either. But Ania proved a good person to chat to and he told her about his work (she was impressed) and his recent singleness (she was sympathetic). While they chatted his eye was drawn repeatedly to her nose. The gorgeous nostrils flared, as if inhaling deeply, and when she breathed out it was through her mouth. Heavily, a little shaky. There was a flush in her cheeks. He'd not seen her hands for some time.

"Are you – *touching*, I mean are you—?" he blurted.

Ania grinned sheepishly. "I'm so sorry. I couldn't help myself." Her hand came up into view. She licked her fingers. "You smell unbelievably good. I've never—" She suppressed a shudder. "Oh, God, never."

Felix's heart tripped over itself in panic. "You can *smell* me? That thing is on?" He clicked wildly at icons on the chat window. Ania disappeared but he could still hear her.

"Of course. Teleroma is on as standard, you have to opt out. But please. *Please*, don't."

Don't? She could smell him, and she wasn't repulsed? He relaxed a fraction. "Well, why can't I smell you?"

"I'm sorry, I'm being selfish. I didn't want my feedback to contaminate you. It took so long to track you down." When she reached forward to click something on the computer balanced on her lap he noticed that her blouse wasn't tucked into anything. The taint of soap mixed with the faint but unmistakable odour of female arousal leaked from his computer. "Felix, I've got to see you tonight."

"But aren't you in Poland?"

With a smile, she shook her head. "Please." He told her his address. She closed the connection.

While Felix waited, he went over what she had said. She genuinely found his odour attractive? What was she, some sort of freak?

Ania almost knocked him over when he opened the door. Then she was kissing him, licking his face, yanking off his robe, popping buttons from his pyjamas. He smelled the rain on her hair, the sweat from her run up the stairs, the edge of something else – *alcohol*?

"The Nose," she breathed. "Put on the Nose."

She followed him through to the office. "I smelled you in the drop off zone of Frederic Chopin Airport. I *had* to have you," she told him as he unlocked the desk drawer and retrieved the box. "I've bribed people. Coerced them even. Eventually I got your email address. Thank you for replying." She nodded at the golden gleam in his hand. "Put it on." Felix did as he was told, and immediately his visitor shuddered.

"I smell worse when I'm wearing it?"

Ania licked her lips several times before finding the breath to reply. "Oh, God, a million times better." With the Nose on, her arousal was overpowering, her sweat almost as erotic, and that other smell was stronger too. Not alcohol, but familiar. Something medicinal...

She pushed him back against the desk, tore off what remained of his nightwear, and it was only when the damp cloth was clamped over his face that he finally recognised the smell.

Of course, *chloroform*.

THE HOUSE was very nice. It was spacious and sparsely but tastefully decorated. Clean walls, stone floors, functional furniture, plain accessories. Sterile. It was not in Vienna. There were no mountains high enough for the air to be this pure in Vienna. Felix didn't even think it was in Austria. The German the house-keeper spoke was different. He suspected Bavaria perhaps.

He thought of himself as a prisoner. But he found he didn't mind so much. He watched HBO and played Warcraft (his goblin avatar was called Stinky Bill) and read from a well selected library of books.

And three times a day he got naked, put on the Nose and broadcast himself in Teleroma for an hour.

Occasionally, Ania visited. They had exhausting sex and then lay in bed and talked. She told him, to his surprise, that he was not in fact a prisoner in the house. Rather, he owned the place, having paid for it outright in the first two weeks when they'd broadcast him sedated as "proof of concept" to their backers. It would be unfortunate if he was to leave, but he could do so if he wanted. He thought the distinction was a technicality, but stopped worrying about it when she showed him his bank balance.

And so it went. To keep things interesting for the punters, they varied his diet: Spice Time!, Umami Hour! Apparently that made a difference to his odour. Sometimes, they gave him things to smell with the Nose – orchid blossoms, durian fruit, cow shit – because that made a difference too. Felix did as he was told. He chose early on not to watch them watching him – the myriad white faces in dark rooms, many with Teleroma masks squashed against them as they struggled to breath in everything he had to offer, the orgiastic groaning; it was all too much. Much better to content himself with the ever fluctuating, but overall steadily rising, visitor stats. To think of the money.

One time he asked Ania: "Am I famous?"

Her smile was broad. "In the greater world, no one has a clue who you are," she said. "But to the people who matter, you are a god."

They fed him exquisitely but he knew he was losing weight. "Am I going to die?"

Ania kissed his brow. "We all die," she whispered. "Surely all that matters is that, by the time we do, we achieve the things are hearts wish for."

Felix stroked the Nose, heavy and solid and cold. He breathed in and smelled, faintly, an entirely new smell. It was warm and cool, and bright and mellow. It was rich, and it was oh so very sweet.

Neil Williamson's last *Interzone* appearance was 'The Posset Pot' in issue 252. You can read more of his stories in his collection, *The Ephemera*. His debut novel, *The Moon King*, has been called "literary fantasy at its best" by *The Guardian* and "a sparkling debut novel" by none other than *Interzone*.

PRAISE FOR NINA ALLAN'S SPIN

"Nina Allan's reimagining of the Arachne myth, with its receding overlays of the modern and the antique, creates a space all its own. The scene is clean and minimal, the light Mediterranean, the story seems musing and sad: but by the last two pages, *Spin* has you in a grip that persists long after you put it down"

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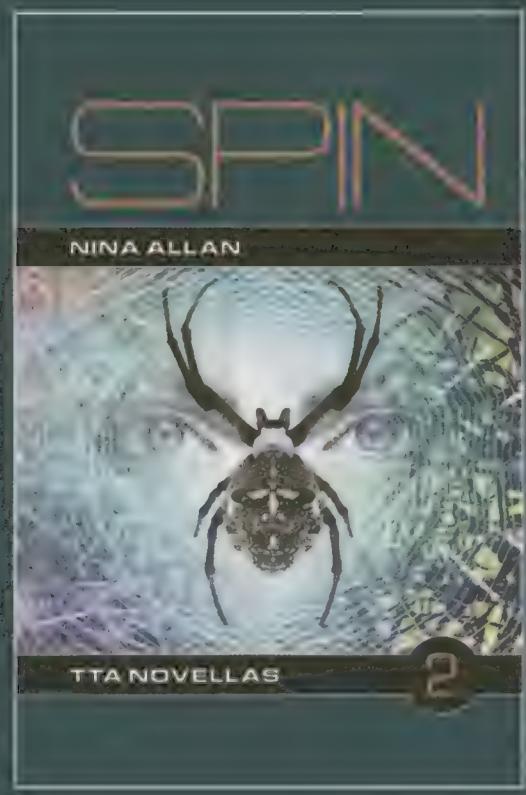
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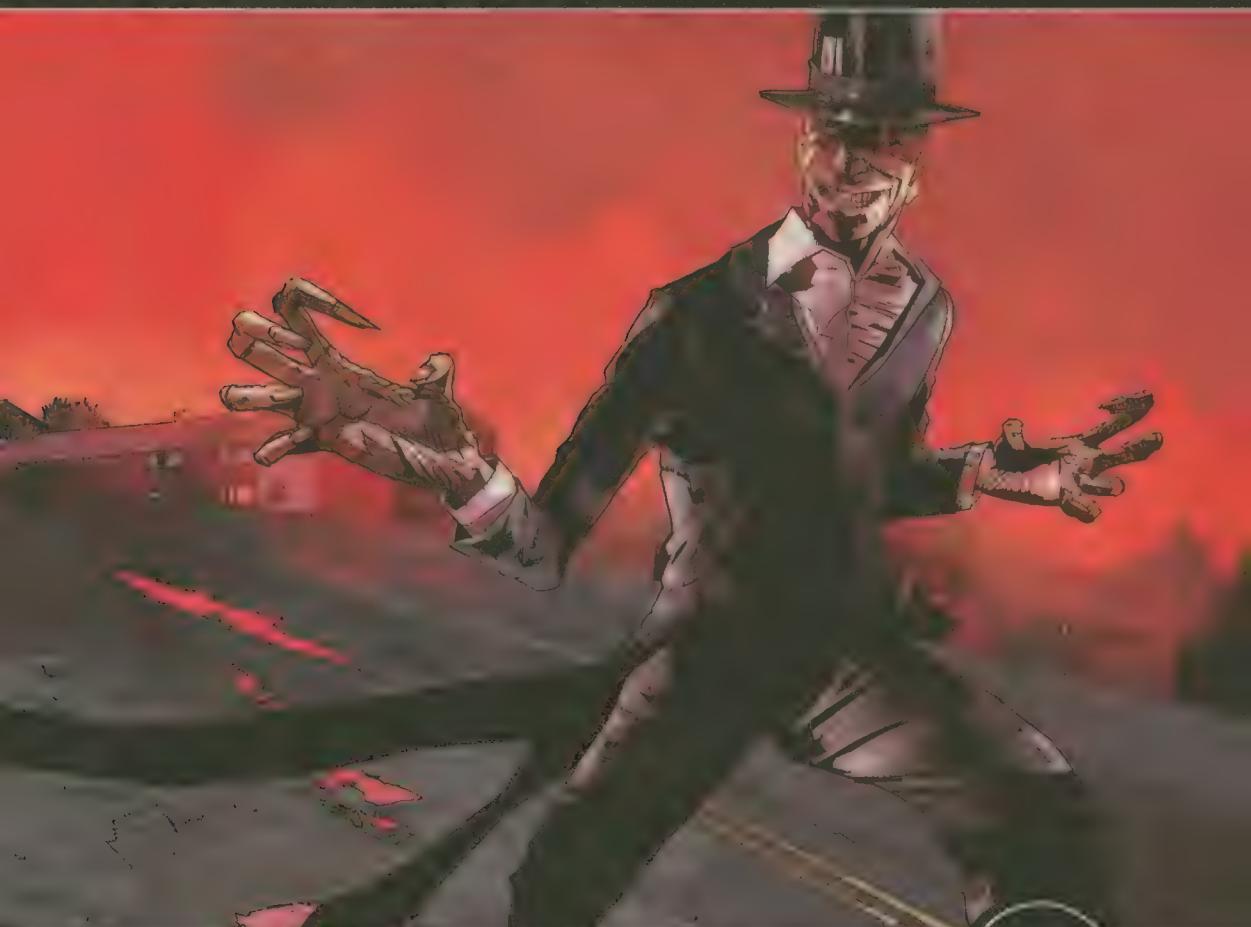
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COLD TURKEY

CAROLE JOHNSTONE



TTA NOVELLAS

3

Wraparound cover art by Warwick Fraser-Coombe
warwickfrasercoombe.blogspot.co.uk

B format paperback, 160 pages on cream bookwove, matt laminated cover

COLD TURKEY

CAROLE JOHNSTONE



Jimmy blinked up at him, his wide moonface uncharacteristically solemn. "It's okay, Mr Munroe. If you tell the truth you can't get into trouble."

Raym drew his weary and still shaky hand over his eyes and cheeks. "What?"

"I seen him."

"Saw," Raym corrected, and then he dropped his gaze, his heart starting up its unhelpful jack-hammering again.

"What?"

"I saw him Mr Munroe." A sly look lit up Jimmy's blinking eyes. "He's always chasing you."

Raym's hand froze in front of his chest, creeping back up towards his throat again. "What?"

"In a funny square van." The kid blinked, blinked, blinked. He wooshed his hands either side of his body like he was starting a drag race, and Raym flinched again. "It's got black tails - really, really looong ones, like party streamers!"

"Part nightmare, part pitch black comedy, Johnstone's novella has a hallucinatory quality that keeps you guessing until the final reveal."

Cold Turkey is genuinely chilling, an addictive mystery that will have readers turning pages until well after midnight. It is Johnstone's skill in characterisation and in the rendering of dialogue, however, that is most consistently mesmerising. Her sense of place is masterful, leaving you with the conviction that she doesn't just know these people, she cares about them, too. *Cold Turkey* must surely be Carole Johnstone's most confident and assured achievement to date and I loved reading it"

—Nina Allan—

"I think that *Cold Turkey* might be my favourite of the novella series so far. It's straightforward on the most immediate level, but through that delves into an entirely believable character. It is what I would term traditional horror, predicated on basic ideas of human nature, and even evokes a chill at the bottom of the spine when it really gets going. Well-written and engaging, it represents another triumph for Carole Johnstone and TTA themselves"

—Matthew S. Dent—

"An evil little git of a story with an evil little hook at the end. I enjoyed this very much"

—DeAnna Knippling—

"From its grisly opening gambit reminding the reader of the dark, phlegmy fate awaiting all who fail to give up the snouts, to its climactic stalking, creeping, flailing, bloody finale, this is what horror should be like - as ghastly as examining the contents of a dying man's hankie, and a hell of a lot more fun"

—Christopher Fowler—

"A disturbing, nightmarish yet also darkly humorous take on the perils of addiction, self-deception and lost time; in some ways *Cold Turkey* is reminiscent of a Stephen King story - if King had grown up in Motherwell instead of Maine - but Carole Johnstone's voice is distinctively Scottish, her talent uniquely her own"

—Lisa Tuttle—

"*Cold Turkey* is one hell of a read. Johnstone's prose is consistently lively and engaging throughout, speckled with moments of wonderfully dark comedy. Best of all, though, is the villainous Top Hat, who is brought to life so vividly that his every stretched grin fills the mind's eye with ease. He's creepy, frightening and just sheer nasty - a brilliant character, realised impeccably. An excellent novella, and highly recommended"

—Dread Central—

"Johnstone has created her own iconic villain in *Cold Turkey* in the form of Top Hat - a nastier, far more horrific version of the cartoon 'Nick-O-Teen' character voiced by Valentine Dyall for British Stop Smoking advertisements in the 1970s. A terrifying rendition of an especially demented Ronald Searle cartoon come to life, Top Hat is as memorable a villain as *Cold Turkey* is a novella. Beautifully written by Johnstone and beautifully presented with superb cover art by Warwick Fraser-Coombe, *Cold Turkey* acquits itself admirably as a nightmarishly disturbing addition to the TTA novella range. All the smokers out there should save their cigarette money and buy this instead - just to make the experience ever more intense"

—This Is Horror—

"*Cold Turkey* is an enthralling story, and is highly recommended"

—Shawn Vogt—

"*Cold Turkey* is one of those books that every writer dreams off writing, the sort of book that will remain as a fixed point in time on their career. A book that in a perfect world will mark the dawning of a new era in their success. Bold, assured, utterly rewarding, this is a book that everyone should read"

—Ginger Nuts of Horror—

"Superbly written, with a great feel for character, dialogue and location, this is a great read and I highly recommend it"

—Mark West—

"Raym's parabolic glide between bleak sanity and potential madness is deftly handled and well-paced. This is frequently helped by a cast of well-drawn and often excellent secondary characters for Raym to riff against, chief among them Wendy, his long-suffering other half. The grimness of Raym's predicament is often leavened by some well-judged humour, particularly within a number of staff room scenes. And then there's the ending, one which I think will linger long in the mind. It's powerful stuff indeed, going from the comically awful to the breathtakingly horrifying within the space of a few uneasy pages. Great stuff!"

—Lucian Poll—

"*Cold Turkey* is wise, mischievous and a delight to read. Johnstone tells a mesmerising tale, every time"

—Joseph D'Lacey—

"The climax of this novella as part of the school production for Easter is surprising, shocking even, as well as hilarious and brilliantly done. The whole school ethos indeed, and the characterisation of teachers, the staff room and so forth, are very believable and nicely done"

—D.F. Lewis—



JAMES WHITE AWARD WINNER

The James White Award is a short story competition open to non-professional writers and is decided by an international panel of judges made up of professional authors and editors. Previous winners have gone on to either win other awards or get published regularly, which is exactly why the award was set up. The winning story receives a cash prize, a handsome trophy and publication in *Interzone*. Entries are received from all over the world, and a shortlist is drawn up for the judges. To learn more about the Award itself visit jameswhiteaward.com.

This year's judges were Sophia McDougall, Emma Newman and Adam Roberts. The winner of the £200 first prize was 'Beside the Dammed River' by D.J. Cockburn. The judges also awarded a special recommendation to Vina Jin-Mae Prasad for her story 'Flesh and Bone'.

The 2015 James White Award is now open. Entry is free.

The James White Award was instituted to honour the memory of one of Ireland's most successful science fiction authors, James White. To learn more about James White and his writing, visit www.sectorgeneral.com.

Narong heard children running to the road before he heard the pickup truck. He sighed. When he'd been a child, there had been nothing unusual about cars in Ubon Ratchathani province. All the same, he was happy enough to set down the empty water barrow and stretch his back as the plume of dust approached.

As the truck and its trailer got closer, he savoured the healthy roar from the engine. As rare as the unscrapped white paint under the film of dust. He couldn't remember when he last saw a truck that didn't carry its age as he did, in wrinkled bodywork and incessant wheezing before starting up. He winced as a pothole thumped the tyres and rattled the suspension. The healthy sound wouldn't last long if the driver kept hitting them like that.

Perhaps Narong was still a child at heart because he squinted, trying to make out the manufacturer's badge. The truck thumped another pothole. The engine screamed in mechanical agony, faded to a whine and fell silent. The truck coasted past him and stopped fifty metres away. He wondered what was under the tarpaulins covering the truck's bed and its trailer.

A farang woman got out on the passenger side. Her ginger hair was just long enough to shimmer as she moved. She wore a sleeveless shirt and knee-length shorts, revealing skin so white it defied the sun pounding this water-forsaken corner of Thailand.

Narong's interest stirred. Today would have more to mark it than dust and water barrows.

The line of children by the roadside collapsed into a gaggle as they ran toward her, like a shoal of catfish outside a river temple when someone threw food into the water. Narong decided he was definitely still a child when he found himself following them as fast as his arthritic knees would carry him.

The woman backed toward the truck, looking as though she expected the children to steal the clothes she stood in. Her bare shoulder touched the hot metal of the cab. She jerked forward with a yelp.

"Stand back, younger brothers and sisters." Narong caught his breath. He may have been a child at heart, but the pounding in his ears re-

BESIDE THE DAMMED RIVER

D.J. COCKBURN

minded him he didn't have the heart of a child. "It is not good to get so close to our visitors that they cannot move without treading on you."

The children backed away without taking their eyes off the woman. One of them fell into the dry ditch beside the road but there was no laughter as he scrambled out. Even the funniest mishap was less interesting than an exotic stranger. *Farang* were such a rare sight that today's children didn't even know the jokes that kept Narong and his childhood friends entertained for hours.

The woman looked at her driver, a young man with his hair cut short at the back with a longer fringe. He'd probably never driven more than a hundred kilometres from Bangkok. The driver spread his hands, looking helpless. He reminded Narong of the junior official the government sent a couple of years ago, who gave a speech about how the government hadn't forgotten the north east of its country and went back to Bangkok before it got dark. Even the government had shown more sense than to let such a boy drive himself.

The driver stepped out of the cab and looked at Narong. His stare carried all the respect Narong expected a man wearing foreign-made shoes to show an old man wearing sandals made from an old tyre.

Narong had met too many well-dressed boys from Bangkok to expect him to say anything worth listening to. He walked toward the *farang* woman. He wanted to hear her voice.

She watched him coming without looking at him directly, showing her wariness.

Narong pressed his hands together and bowed. "Sawadee kob."

She shuffled her feet and returned his *wai* with the clumsiness of someone unused to the action.

"Sawadee kob," she mumbled. No one had told her women said *kha* instead of *kob*.

"My name is Narong," he said. "Guess your gearbox dropped."

Relief washed over her face at being addressed in English.

"Angela Ri—" She bit off what Narong assumed was her surname. "Angela."

She held out her hand, then remembered she had already done the local equivalent and withdrew it. "How do you know it's the gearbox?"

Narong felt a moment of disappointment. Her voice sounded as if she never used it to laugh.

"Sure sounded like it," he said.

"The gearbox. That's bad?"

The question was addressed to the driver, who looked as though she had set him a problem in differential calculus.

"Got a toolbox?" asked Narong.

Angela looked at the driver.

"Must be jack and wrench somewhere," he said.

"He said a toolbox, Gehng. It's a bust gearbox, not a flat tyre."

As she rounded on Gehng, Narong saw pearls of sweat gathered across her shoulders. How much water must she drink in this climate? He winced at the volume he estimated.

"In this make, it's usually under a panel behind the cab," said Narong.

Angela looked at Gehng, who showed no sign of knowing if there was a panel, let alone a toolbox. Narong reached for the knot tying the tarpaulin to the cleats along the side of the truck. Gehng seized his wrist.

"It is not good to look underneath." The hard edge in Gehng's Thai contrasted with his deferential English.

"Oh for God's sake, Gehng, let him look." Angela may not have understood Thai, but Gehng's body language was unambiguous. "He seems to have some idea of what he's doing."

"I call headquarters in Bangkok." Gehng pulled a phone from the pouch on his belt. "They send..."

His voice faded.

"Where there's no water, nobody repairs the roads," Narong returned to the knot. "Where the roads are bad, there are no maintenance trucks. Where there are no maintenance trucks, there is no signal."

The rope was so new it was slippery. Whoever tied it knew nothing about knots and had tried to compensate by tying several of them. Narong's fingers weren't as nimble as they once were.

"Narong. I know your name." Gehng returned to Thai. "So if you ever speak of what is in the truck, it will not be good for you and your village."

Narong tugged the last knot apart. He stepped back and looked at Gehng. He was more irked by Gehng's omission of the respectful *pee*, the right of an older man, than by his empty threats. If whatever was under the tarpaulin was that important, Gehng wouldn't admit he'd allowed Narong to see it. If Gehng reported to anyone who cared who said what in Ubon Ratchathani, he'd leave Narong out of the report.

He looked at Angela with the secret surname, letting Gehng know it was obvious who was in charge here.

"Go ahead," she said.

Narong allowed himself a trace of a smirk when he looked back at Gehng. A look that said if he was trying to impress Angela into giving him a bonus, he wasn't doing very well so he could stop acting the *phoo yai* big man. Gehng's eyes replied that he read the message and hated Narong for it, but realised his mouth would serve him best by staying shut.

Narong glanced at Angela, whose expression hadn't changed. She had seen nothing that passed between him and Gehng.

Narong couldn't resist a flourish when he threw back the tarpaulin, revealing the load to the children. The rock on the truck's bed was matt grey. Its surface was bubbled as though it had been almost melted and then solidified. He touched one of the bubbles. It was as hard as stone. Some sort of polymer, he guessed. He looked up to the holes bored into the top of the rock and understood Gehng's unease.

Angela gave him a smile that didn't quite touch her eyes. She obviously hoped an old man

pushing a water barrow wouldn't know what he was looking at.

"Pity we can't see it without the heat shield," he said. "The children would appreciate the sparkle of enriched platinum ore. From an M-type asteroid."

Angela said nothing. Even though asteroid mining had produced enough metal to drop prices, he was looking at no less than five million dollars.

"So that's a crane in the trailer, and the parachute that was bolted to it?" he asked.

Angela's nod was minute. If she was trying to hide her thoughts, she wasn't very good at it. She was wondering how an old peasant understood so much and wished he didn't. She wouldn't know Ubon Ratchathani had been a wealthy province twenty years ago. If the world had retreated from Ubon Ratchathani with the water, Ubon Ratchathani had not forgotten the world.

The curved edge of the asteroid didn't cover the toolbox panel, so they wouldn't need to unload it. Still, some temptations couldn't be resisted.

"I'm not as young as I used to be," he said to Angela. "Perhaps you could have your driver get the toolbox out?"

Angela nodded. "Gehng."

The look on Gehng's face gave Narong a memory to treasure.

He turned back to Angela. "Your company sent you to recover it?"

For a moment, her face showed the need to avoid the question battling the need to ingratiate herself with a possible rescuer. He waited until she nodded uneasily. "It was supposed to go into the Gobi Desert. That's..."

She waved a hand, wondering how to explain the geography.

"In Mongolia," he said.

"Yes. Um. Well, something went wrong and it ended up in Thailand, so they sent us to get it."

"And take it to Cambodia," said Narong.

"Uh, no, I mean..."

"You're going the wrong way for Bangkok." Narong was enjoying himself a little too much. "No airport ahead of you till you get to Phnom Penh."

The sound of a tearing shirt and a very Anglo-

phone expletive drew Narong's attention to Gehng falling out of the truck with the toolbox.

"Thank you, *Neung Gehng*," Narong deliberately addressed him as a younger man.

He opened the toolbox. The shine of stainless steel assailed him. For the first time since he'd seen the truck, he wanted something. Rows of screwdrivers and spanners cried out to him, pleading their supremacy over his own rusty toolkit that he kept wrapped in an old shirt.

He called himself a foolish old man. Tools like these belonged to his past. Narong's knees cracked as he eased himself on his back. He pulled himself under the truck. There wasn't a speck of rust on the chassis or the suspension, which was reinforced to take the load. It was a youthful vehicle compared to the doddering old wrecks he was so often called to resurrect, but he doubted it was treated with a fraction of the care people lavished on their vehicles in Ubon Ratchathani. This truck was owned by people who could afford to hand it off to a driver who didn't realise he was invested in it until it broke down. It was painful to look at.

"You should be careful on these roads," said Narong. "The dirt tracks aren't too bad, but a lot of the roads round here are just tarmac that broke up for want of maintenance. They'll rip your truck to pieces with this load."

The answering silence told him Angela was glaring at Gehng and Gehng was looking anywhere but at Angela. Gehng must have bored her because her feet moved behind the front wheel until they were level with Narong's head. Her face appeared as she squatted down to watch him.

"How's it going?" she asked.

She wanted him to say he'd have it fixed in five minutes, no problem.

"I'll know in a minute."

She was leaning forward to see under the truck, giving him an interesting view down the front of her top. He hauled his eyes back to the gearbox. He was too old for such things, he told himself sternly. But he couldn't resist snatching another look.

"What company do you work for?" he asked.

"One of the small ones." Her eyes shifted away. "You probably haven't heard of it."

He'd heard enough to know there were no small companies able to afford the investment needed to mine asteroids. He also knew that while the UN Outer Space Treaty said nothing about exploitation, it didn't allow for staking ownership of asteroids. If a chunk of asteroid happened to fall on Thailand, it became the property of the Thai government. Angela and Gehng couldn't have made it more obvious that removing the asteroid was illegal if they had shouted it at him. No wonder Gehng was nervous.

It occurred to Narong that he was helping Angela steal from his country. Still, if the government cared whether people in Ubon Ratchathani followed its rules, it wouldn't have left them to desiccate.

"You seem to know a lot about mechanics," said Angela. "And you speak very good English."

Narong managed to restrict himself to studying her face. She didn't see what she was doing as stealing. She was going where her company had sent her, doing an unpleasant job that involved heat, dust and keeping the company's business a little more confidential than usual. Gehng looked like a junior employee of a local subcontractor, who would be in Thailand long after Angela had left for good. No wonder he didn't want anyone seeing the asteroid.

"I used to be a professor of engineering at Chulalongkhorn University," he said.

"Chula... I'm sorry, I haven't heard of that."

"It closed five years ago. When the Chinese built their dams upstream of us, well, a country lives on water as much as a man or a woman does. We shrivelled up. We couldn't afford all our universities."

Angela sat down in the dusty road. *Farang* could never squat for very long.

"So you came here?"

The incredulity in her voice drew another look from him. Her head was tilted to one side and her brow was furrowed. She really didn't understand.

"I grew up here. Of course it was greener then."

"But it's..." She waved her arm. "It's so dry. It must be so hard. Is there nowhere else you could go?"

As if companies like hers were always taking on unemployed academics past retirement age.

Hed applied all over the world when the department closed. Hed still had ambition then.

"It's better than the slums in Bangkok," he said.

Her expression didn't change. For her, Bangkok meant air-conditioned hotels and restaurants on Sukhumvit Road. The new slums sprawling outside Bangkok's dykes were as alien to her as the people of Ubon Ratchathani had been until the gearbox screamed. There was no point in trying to explain how the slums flooded every time it rained on a high tide, and how they would need to be abandoned altogether if the sea level kept rising over the next decade or two

He changed spanners.

"I used to work on monofilament dew collectors. When I came here, I set them up on every hillock we can get a barrow to," he said. "They give us enough water to grow GM cassava, and a few other things."

He felt the cadence of his voice slip into the turns of the spanner. "We'll do *what* we can with what we *have* for as long as we *can*."

It was a beautiful spanner.

"The longer we can keep our children away from the slums, the better. Do you have children, *Khun Angela*?"

"Two girls." Perhaps her voice had known laughter after all. "It's hard being away from them. Sometimes you have to do what the company says, you know?"

"I'm sure."

"Their names are Jasmine and Rebecca. I haven't even been able to call them for the last couple of days."

Narong saw the anecdote he would become, the old peasant pushing a barrow who turned out to be a professor and rescued mother in the wilderness. Her eyes sparkled as she spoke of her girls, looking forward to telling them about him. He concentrated on the gearbox, giving the odd grunt when Angela paused for breath. It was as though Angela had been keeping all her talk behind a dam hed breached when he mentioned her favourite subject. Narong smiled. Any thought that involved breaching dams was worth smiling at.

"I never married," he said.

Neither of them had much to say after that. He worked in silence for the next half hour. When

he pulled himself from under the truck, Gehng was in the driver's seat with his feet dangling outside the cab. His disconsolate expression made him look very young. Angela paced up and down, her exposed skin already tinted pink.

She turned to him with a pleading look. "Could you fix it?"

"Partly," said Narong. "It will run in first and second gear, but no higher. It should get you to Phnomh Penh. You'll be able to get a proper repair there."

Angela bit her lip. "It'll take, what? Ten, twelve hours to get to Phnomh Penh in second gear?"

"At least. You are welcome to stay here if you wish. Gehng could send another vehicle when he gets there."

Angela's hair was lank with sweat. She wouldn't know how to wash without using water as though it came from an unlimited reservoir. He would have regretted the offer if there was any chance she would accept it.

"That's very kind of you," she said, "but I need to stay with the load."

She was determined to annihilate every kilometre between her and an air-conditioned room with a phone she could call her children on.

"Of course."

Narong handed the toolbox to Gehng. He felt a morsel of pity as Gehng scrambled under the asteroid fragment. He wasn't looking forward to the next ten to twelve hours.

He stood with Angela, watching Gehng replace the tarpaulin.

"You should keep the revs low," he said in English. "I did what I could, but too much strain will drop it again."

Gehng didn't react, but Angela nodded. Her eyes wouldn't leave the rev counter all the way to Phnomh Penh.

"We'll be careful," she said. "I really appreciate your help, sir." She hadn't caught his name. "How much do I owe you?"

"There is no charge. It cost me nothing."

She had made his day more interesting. It would cheapen the memory if it became a transaction.

"There must be something I can do. You saved our lives."

Narong managed not to laugh at the dramatic

statement. He watched her watching him, wanting to pay off her sense of obligation. Her body was already poised as if to run for the cab. From some dark corner of his mind, the idea of asking for another look down her top jumped into his consciousness.

"Next time you lose a rock, could you drop it on one of the dams blocking the Mekong?"

She laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

He'd given her the punchline to the story she'd tell her daughters.

Gehng finished his idea of tying down the tarpaulin. He made a *wai* in Narong's direction. Angela was oblivious to the disrespect in the minimal dip of his shoulders. Narong sent them on their way with a straight back and a smile that would be a friendly parting for Angela and an insult to Gehng.

The note of the truck's engine rose, fell as Gehng engaged second gear, rose again and fell abruptly. Narong laughed aloud, imagining Angela ordering Gehng to keep the revs down and Gehng's stifled sigh.

He picked up the socket set and spanner he'd left under the truck. An old man should not be a slave to temptation, but it could be years before anyone even looked in the toolbox again. He put the tools on top of the water barrow and pushed it toward the dew collectors on the hillock.

D.J. Cockburn has been publishing occasional stories for several years now, in between receiving a long monologue of rejections and earning a living through medical research on various parts of the African continent. Other phases of his life have included teaching unfortunate children and experimenting on unfortunate fish. His website is at cockburndj.wordpress.com.

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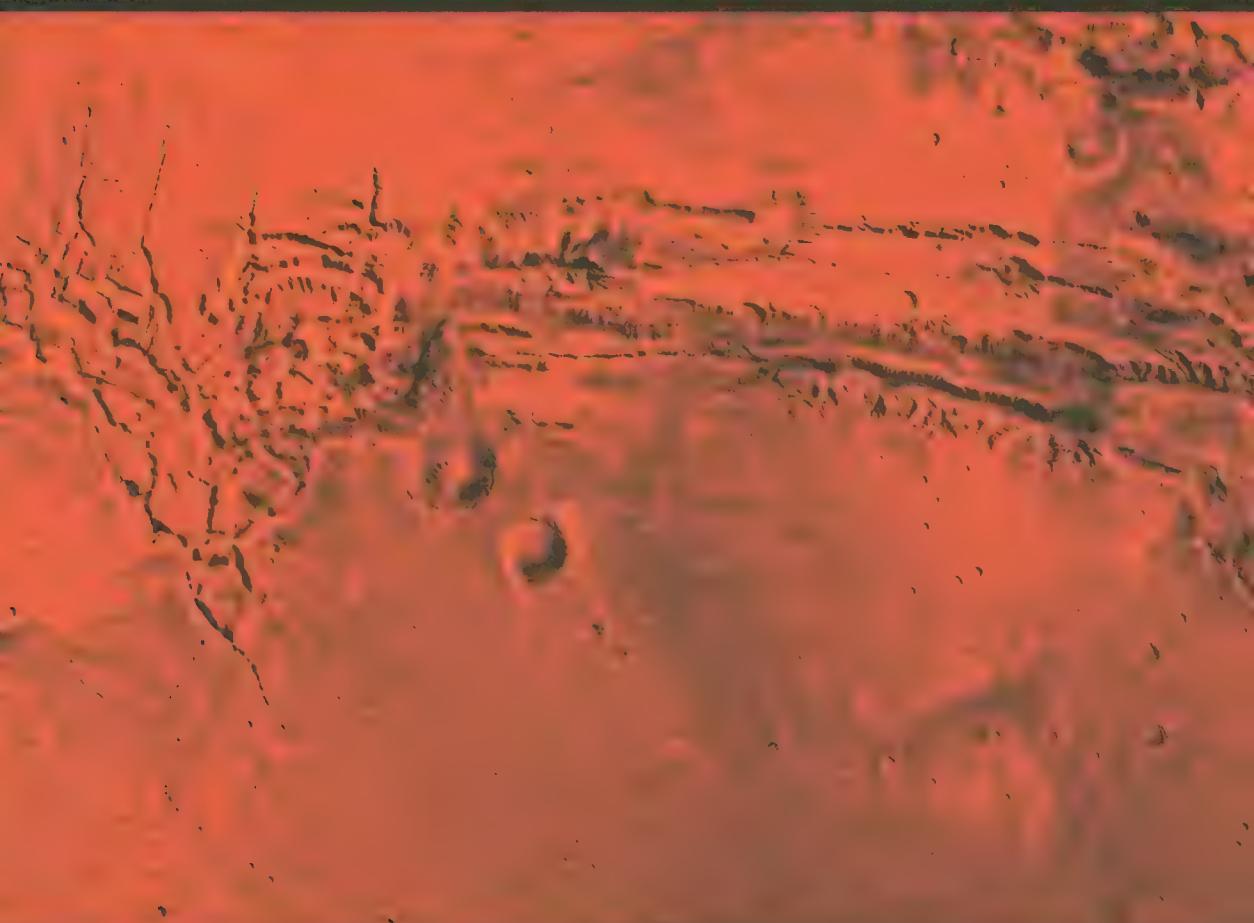
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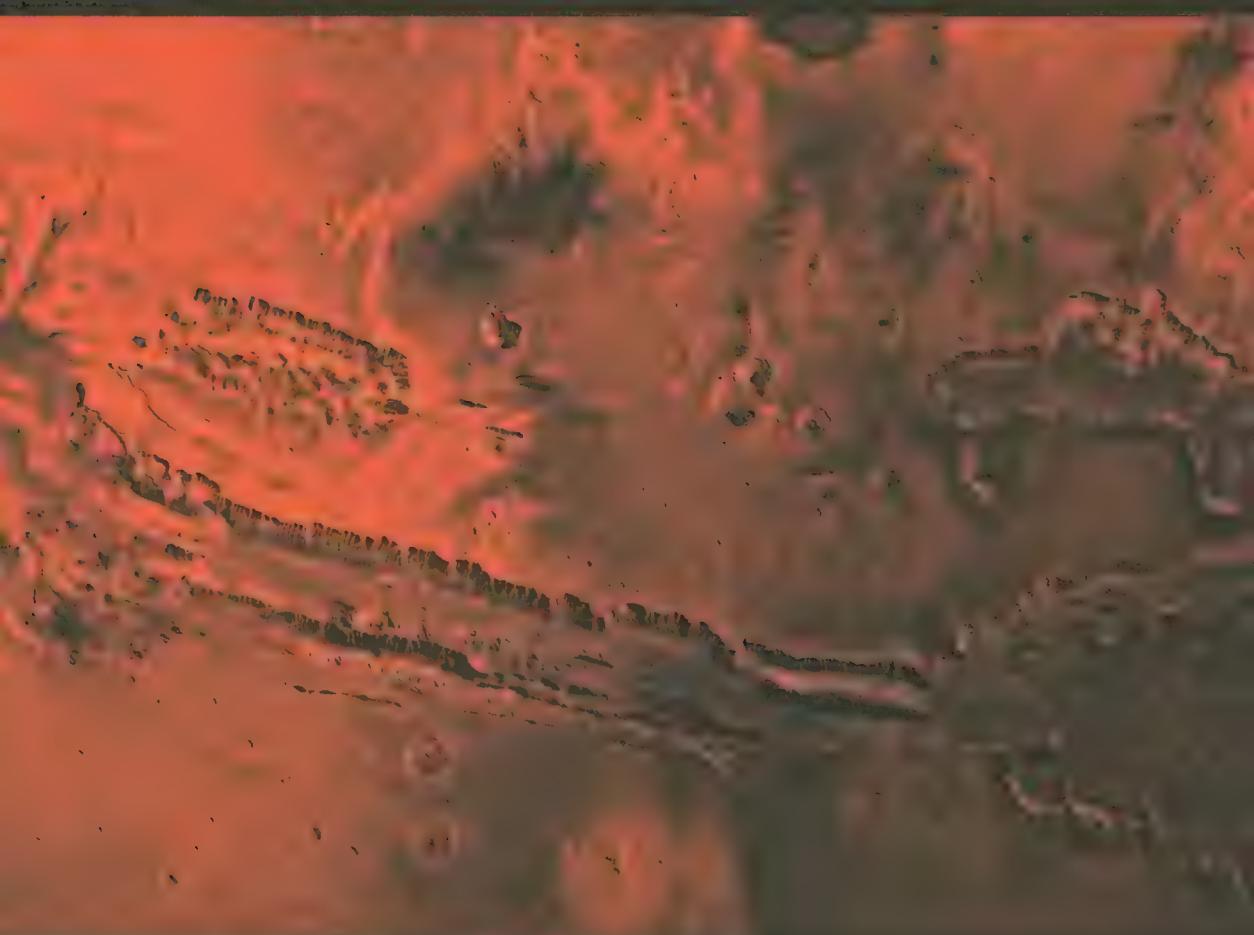
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CHASMATA



E. CATHERINE TOBLER

YOU DON'T REMEMBER, BUT THIS IS
WHERE WE BEGAN. (I THINK THIS IS
BOTH TRUE AND NOT - JUST LISTEN.)





This sepia waste of a place, just you and me, and all those wind storms. You wished for rain – eventually it came, flooding *Valles Marineris* the way you flooded me. You don't remember, but right now I do, and I will show you again.

You wanted to know what he would have made of this place – though he made many things in his fictions, you pictured him here, actually on the planet, crafting things that no one else could ever think of, or would ever dare. Surely we had dared amazing things – we were here after all, but there was something special about him, whether young or old, dead or alive, bound to Earth or elsewhere.

Your gloved hands cradled rocks we brought from the surface and you wondered what Ray would have made of them. They were only rocks after all, but of course they weren't. They were somehow special on this planet, just as every other thing was, just as every other thing became. Ordinary things took on new meanings – clocks were different here, showers were different, and always there was the lack of rain. My lips would grow dry until your thumb brushed over them – papery prelude to a kiss which restored them. Restored me.

I kiss you now and there is an echo within your lips. Your chin tips up. This silent pressure you remember.

The first time wasn't sweet. It shouldn't have happened at all.

You suppose they should have known – in the end you know they did, and they wanted this specific pair (us, oh us) for this specific reason. They knew how it would go, what we would bring to this place, the child (children) we would

create on this new world. How many years before others came? Before they joined our family unit? Too many. Not enough. There were others already, but flung so distant across this planet that they didn't matter. Not here and now.

But, the first time.

Valles Marineris stretches farther than anyone can rightly imagine; Ray knew, you said, when we stood on the edge of the abyss and looked until we could look no more. Ray looked up and imagined this very place, the people it once held, the ghosts it still did. Four thousand three hundred and twenty-two kilometers, that was how far we had measured across. Twenty three thousand feet down? Twenty three thousand and two. We would go down there – not this time – but we would love it at the bottom, in the sepia-black where all things became possible. Where one of the worst things happened.

We wondered if this valley were related to another, to the Mariana Trench which stabs its way into Earth's gut. You told me *Marineris* and Mariana weren't related at all – *Marineris* was Latin for a long-ago spacecraft that had visited this place. How deep was the trench on Earth? We couldn't remember, had to pore through computers and tablets when we got back to our base – but that didn't stop us from guessing. Deeper than *Valles Marineris*, you said. Surely not, I argued. One could fit inside the other, you said, and showed me, cradling my hand inside your own. Maybe it was less long, you said as your long gloved fingers enclosed mine; maybe it was deeper – and here your hand cupped around mine, flesh sucking to flesh despite these gloves – and that was when we knew.

Maybe rather when I knew. You said you knew weeks (months? You would never confess such)



before on the flight, because you watched the way I slept, the way I went boneless there and nowhere else. You said you wanted to follow me into that abyss, wanted to see all the things I saw (because my eyes, you said, they never stopped moving even in sleep). Your hand moved around mine and I could only stare, picturing canyons fitting inside canyons, all rocks and hard edges, and yet not. Reveling in scrape and landslide.

Inside, where you kissed me, your lips missed my whole mouth, taking only the bottom lip between your own. Scrape and landslide.

How does a person sleep with that gaping canyon outside the door? It grows even now, constantly pulled apart by a still-restless planet, eventually deepened by erosional forces. They all wondered – everyone we had left behind on Earth. Wasn’t it like a monstrous, gaping mouth ready to swallow us, they asked. Yes, we said. They were vexed by our lack of elaboration. They wanted to know what it looked like in moonlight, in sunlight, in eclipse – and the moons did eclipse, beautifully so, swallowed by shadows in space as they circled, spat out when the shadow had its fill. What did *Valles Marineris* look like in complete blackness? It looked black, we said. Wasn’t that terrifying? they demanded to know.

We supposed it should have been, but it wasn’t. It wasn’t that Ray had mapped it so well, or that Earth’s own spacecraft had; it wasn’t that we knew every centimeter of every rock, every turn of every offshoot. That yawning trench was familiar to us. It wasn’t like being one hundred and forty million miles from home; we were finally home here, on the edge of this canyon, ready to set down proper roots the way we hadn’t on Earth.

Some people are like that. You can’t explain it. It’s why we went; it’s why they knew we were perfect. They can’t explain the people who go into deep space; once upon a time, they couldn’t explain the people who left England to cross the ocean. Wherever we were didn’t satisfy; there was always new land to leave footprints on. Ray would have understood, you told the people back on Earth; he would have known what *Valles Marineris* looked like without explanation.

It looked, often, like your mouth.

I come back to this: the moons were melting.

Your eyes widen a little when I tell you that, because you remember that piece. Melting is inexact, you say, because that word still pricks you.

They surely looked like they were melting, I say, and your fingers enfold mine again. There is a slant to your smile.

Sodium atoms, you say, a trail thousands of miles long, so faint we cannot see them with ordinary means, though Ray probably knew they were there. Earth’s moon does this, too—

Melting, I say.

—solar radiation pressure accelerating the faint particles into a long tail that might look like a comet, so if you insist on being poetic—

I insist.

—it could be likened to...glitter.

You flinch even at that word, pricked deep down, but there’s that slant to your mouth again.

For a long while, there is no talking, only my papery lips moving against that slant. You remember this, too, still. You melt, though this is also inexact.

There comes a day in a month – months used to have names? – when I don’t know you.

I am startled to see you in the kitchen with my daughter. Your hand fits perfectly against the curve of her skull, as though it has been there countless times, and her eyes are your eyes, but I still don't know you. This day, you remember the way I take my coffee, and you remember I don't like eggs even as I touch the cold oval of one. They aren't actually eggs is my problem with them. I don't know what they are.

This feels like the longest day of my life, even though there was one longer. This day, I can't even remember that one, but it comes back. Eventually.

I shouldn't have gone, but I couldn't stay away. You understood even as you screamed at me. (You never screamed, it wasn't your way, but here in the depths of *Valles Marineris*, you did. I heard that silent agony ripping from your body the way it did mine.)

(We were not in our bedroom – I tell myself this, and so tell you too, so you will remember it the way it must be remembered – so we were not in the room that sheltered us from the fatal nights outside, the room where we created such beautiful things inside each other.)

There were no hard suits that day, no soft suits, but ice clouds drifted high above which meant aphelion, you whispered, the farthest point away, even as your hands slid over the rounded mound of my belly, perihelion. There was life for a little while yet, and I watched the clouds, thin and ephemeral, so fast across the dome of that sepia sky even though they were frozen. How did they move? What wind pushed them?

Blood smells different here. Painfully hot across my thighs and over your hands, and—

Brief life, small, so small. Two bundles, swad-

dled tight, carried up and up, closer to those ice clouds, but never quite there. Two bundles, but of the sudden four of us, one silent and still. There is a square in the yard still, marked in hard sepia clay, that not even the winds can blow away. They might if I let them, but I finger the drifted sand from these small borders so the farthest point away is not so far at all.

We talk about the loss without saying anything. There is a voice in the way your body moves with and against my own. I think I should be broken, but I'm not; my body heals the way it should, becomes a whole and strong voice again. I think that my voice should lean away from yours, but it is drawn hard into that gravity well, knowing there is solace to be found in the shadow of all of you have to say.

You draw tentative words down the length of my spine and back up. These words sound the same, but never are. Fingers slide questions over my ribs and whispering breath remarks over my shoulder, and yes it's all right and it will never be all right again, but we want what we want, and this— Always this. The blood of you buried inside me to erase this awful thing. The hard suckle of her mouth against me to blot from the clouded sky his pale eyes.

They told us things no other could know. They were so tall, drawn in the colors of old photographs, grown in this gravity and not that which had harbored us – not grown in pods or incubators, but bodies of flesh and bone. Mothers, they had mothers, but there were no families – they did not stay together the way we did. They roamed, needing to stay in constant motion. They found their own kind in time, whether old



or young (these things did not matter, because they did not exist), and mated as they do. It was beautiful – they showed us, two bodies becoming one, one swallowed by the other and back again; we knew that dance, could say oh yes, we know.

They walked us from one end of *Valles Mari-neris* to the other (they did not, but I'm telling you this happened, so it happened), and told us how they named each branch of stone and sand. *Noctis Labyrinthus* was nothing so grand in their language – they didn't have Latin (they would not have, I reason). They called it The Quake. They showed us the fractured stones, how they had been split yet found home at the bottom of this nook. The quake was a terrible thing for them. We are made to understand how it felt as if the entire planet would cleave into pieces unreparable. One body split into two separate bodies – and you would tell me that is not a word, better you say the world was *melting*, but no – unreparable.

They showed us all the places the world had slid, one side into another, where it bulged, where it shot from its core in black tentacled spirals. They showed us every single way this place had been broken and how it lived on. How the world continued in its orbit – they showed us how they marked such, how they used our own world as a guide to where their own stood among the stars. They told us all the names of those stars – the closest word in English for Earth for them was probably "folly," because so many of them didn't believe it existed at all. It was a blue glimmer and then gone. Gone. How could such a thing hold anything as wondrous as them?

The canals were in shambles when they showed us. They took us on some still standing, showing

us how water would run again when the rains came. When was the rainy season, you asked them, and the sound they made could have been laughter or tears or maybe it was equal parts of both. This world was the color of a rusted oil can that had never held oil. They never knew water. Some of them said they remembered. You still wished for rain.

.....

They – scientists and doctors and countless astrobiologists – said this might happen. That our kind (humankind) were not made for the depths of space or the rigors of traveling through it. Rigors is what they called them. Said we were best suited for our own blue sphere, because even when we spent time in its orbit, we decayed. Deep inside, our bodies ate our bones away and turned us into bird-like creatures if we stayed long enough. What would radiation do to our minds, our memories? What would this iron planet do to us when we returned? We didn't plan on a return, so this was never an issue for us. Why would you go to such a place only to leave it?

We spent a lot of time walking. We could have driven our rovers but we preferred the walks, liking the ache in our hips after a long day of going from here to there. This was often before our daughter – *our* daughter, not only mine. Part of you and part of me, wedged into an entity all her own. Once she came, there was less walking and more running.

She loves to run, especially in this light air (the only air she has known), long brown hair streaming out behind her, small bare feet never knowing the lick of cool grass, but only the crunch of coppery sand. She loves to mound the sand over your feet until you wriggle them free. Toe by toe,

pop pop pop, but this only lasts so long.

Her eyes (they are yours, fragmented blue and hazel) watch the sepia figures capering against the horizon and she says they dream of taking her away. (It's the easiest explanation. Why would she want to leave? Hush, hush.)

We could lock her in a closet, but this isn't that story, or planet. She grows up too fast even though years are longer here. She grows tall and thin, so straight against the red sky, and that brown hair deepens to something red-gold.

She longs for others of her kind – we are not them, she tells us every night as we curl her into bed. Not them – those who know this world inside and out because it is their own. We fashion this world in Latin and they do not have Latin, she insists.

Your long fingers plait her hair into braids, each end tied with a ribbon the color of Earth skies; come morning, these ribbons spool undone on her pillow, on her floor. One morning, there are only ribbons.

She wrote us a letter. (No, she didn't, but hush and let me tell this before I go back to melting moons and the way your hand fit against the curve of my head the same way it eventually did hers and—)

I can't. I want to tell you about the rain first.

You don't remember, but this is where we began.

In the hush of space where there was only the muted rumble of the engines through the walls. I said it was like a cat purring. You tried not to laugh, but I saw the way your mouth moved. That slant. I know all the words it conveys and contains, and tell them each to you so that you might remember.

Laughter, derision, amusement, irritation, contemplation, love, love, love unspoken. That was never a word between us – it simply was, the way *Valles Marineris* simply is. The way one finds unexplainable comfort in something so overwhelmingly large. Something so overwhelmingly present.

You told me about rain first – you hated it on Earth. It was something to slog through, something that flooded gutters, leaked through roofs, soaked socks and shoes and wrinkled fingertips. You liked it dry, because dry was simple, uncomplicated by anything so random as water. Water went where it would, dry was always dry and didn't go anywhere.

But slowly on the ship, you came to long for rain. I heard the longing in the slant of your mouth as it moved over the curve of my shoulder in the shower. You tongued the beads of water down the length of my arm, directing them exactly where you wanted them, and you saw something new in water then. Possibility became a word also balanced in the slant of your mouth.

You watched the skies once we settled in. You communicated with the other distant outposts that had been established, asked them every day what they saw in the clouds. They never saw rain. This world was dry, itching for a good downpour. The planet could not stretch to reach the dry ache in its middle.

The day we found her ribbons was the day it rained. (This is both true and not – just listen.)

She wasn't old enough to go on her own (oh, she was, but will you hush?). We did not walk, we ran to the edge of the canyon, all along that jagged edge. (They don't call it *Valles Marineris* – they have no idea what *Mariner 9* was and



though we tell them, they don't care. To them, it's Scar and Cradle and where they first emerged.)

We ran and did not look where we went because it was her we looked for. We saw their tall forms against the sky as we always did, moving in that dance we didn't understand but enjoyed watching, but there was no smaller figure amid them.

We ran, our feet knowing the way without us having to look – we could have traced these routes in our sleep (I probably often did, but you did not, still wishing I could pull you down inside my own dreams). Dust rose in the heavy air, coating arms, cheeks; my lips curled apart they were so dry and at first I thought I was crying – a thing I had not done since we descended to the bottom of the canyon and lost— No. That did not happen. The square in the yard says otherwise, but it needs to hush, and this—

Hush.

This. It was not tears, for it was not salty, but it tasted almost like metal as it washed down from the clouded sky. It was harder than anything we had known (it wasn't), washing away every speck of dust and debris (not entirely). Even at a distance, we could hear the canals overflow. Your hands curled into my arms (they did) and you held tight (always tight) – were you keeping me anchored or you?

We watched the canyon fill and flood, and we stared and we should have been terrified – why didn't you run, they always ask – but there was no need to run, not from the storm we lifted our faces toward. They doubted that the canyon flooded – there is no possible way, they say, that such a large space filled with rain waters. Not on that planet. You would have run. You would have been killed. It did not flood.

But we know it did, and when you lean in to kiss the tears from my cheek now, I can hear in the slant of your mouth that you know it did. You remember.

We found her after the rain. She in her bare feet, walking slow with others of her kind. So impossibly tall, thin like a reed, her hair as red-gold as the sands which gleamed with the storm's wet. She smiled at us and it was her hands (gone larger than our own) that slid over our rain-damp heads, to cup us the way we had cupped her.

You offered her a ribbon and she let you tie it into her sodden hair. (Years later, we would both find ribbons, one in the garden and one in the canyon's depths, and we would not know them as hers or ours. Who was here?)

And then she was gone. Running and not walking as she ever had, into the distance with those great tall beings. Ray would have understood, you said. The people this place once held, the ghosts it still did. Ray knew it was only ever ghosts. Things lost, things broken but still littering the landscape. Glittering it, you say.

We look at those large, fractured stones now and don't understand how they fell. We walk the growing perimeter of our base in bare feet and wonder why we shun shoes. When the winter rains come they wash the yard clean – scrape and landslide – and reveal a square notched into the dirt and we wonder who was here before.

Ray would know, you say.

E. Catherine Tobler's recent story sales include *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, and *Strange Horizons*. She's a Sturgeon Award finalist and the senior editor at *Shimmer Magazine*. This is her first appearance in *Interzone*.



ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

CAREN GUSSOFF

THE BARS OF ORION

SESSION ONE

In this universe, they called it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In this universe, the treatment was drugs, or prolonged exposure, or cognitive therapy, or eye movement reprocessing.

In his universe, they called it Consequent Distress Condition. Blankenship didn't know how it was treated; in his universe, he didn't have it.

The therapist called him in from the waiting room. "Mr. Blankenship?" she asked, and when he stood, she said, "I'm Dr Reed."

One would think in a city the size of Seattle – this one or the other – Blankenship wouldn't keep running into people he knew. In his Seattle, her name was Meridian. In this universe, couples took on one or the other's family name. In his universe, you made a whole new name. Like Blankenship.

Here, the other Blankenship was named Ferguson.

And his wife, Zhorah Blankenship, was still alive and married to someone else. She was called Zhorah Graham.

Blankenship followed this Dr Reed into her office. She motioned for him to pick a seat from the ring of chairs, and then sat directly opposite him.

Blankenship knew he couldn't stay in this Seattle much longer. But it made Tibbi comfortable because it was familiar. So, they stayed. Blankenship would do anything for his daughter. Including combing his hair differently, as differently as he could, and meeting people he already knew.

Hed do anything for Tibbi. His beautiful, brilliant, funny Tibbi. And, if other universes were more like this one than their old one, she was truly one of a kind.

"Forgive me, Mr Blankenship. You look so much like an acquaintance of mine," Dr Reed said. "You have a brother?"

Blankenship shook his head. "Only child. But they say everyone has a twin. They say that, right?"

"Right." Dr Reed sat back in her chair. It was a signal he should also relax. "Today, we're just going to talk. Get to know one another." She looked down at the notes on her lap. "So, you live with your daughter?"

"She's thirteen," he said.

"A wonderful, tough age."

"She's everything." Blankenship ached as he said that.

Dr Reed glanced again at her notes. "You live in a motel. How long have you been there?"

"Since...it happened." Blankenship ached again, but in a different place, in his stomach. He swallowed it down. This treatment was supposed

to help this go away, not rise. It rose just fine on its own. "It's an extended stay motel," he said.

"Do you want to talk about it a little?" Dr Reed blinked. "The incident, I mean. Not the motel. But, of course, we can talk about anything you want." She leaned closer. "But the incident, your target, as we call it, is why we're here. Right?"

Blankenship closed his eyes. He didn't want to look at Reed or Meridian or anyone when he said it. "My universe exploded." He opened his eyes. Nothing had changed. "The motel is comfortable. Just like a little apartment."

Their first house was small, a white wood cottage. Zhorah said inside reminded her of a boat. A cozy little boat. That was why they adopted 'Blankenship'.

He suddenly felt exposed. "You aren't allowed to tell anyone what we talk about here?" Blankenship asked. In his universe, medical professionals swore some sort of oath of silence.

"No," Dr Reed said. The question didn't surprise her. "Doctor-patient confidentiality. I will never disclose anything that goes on here, unless I believe you are an immediate danger to yourself or to others."

"I'm not," Blankenship said. He was pretty sure of that.

"Now, tell me again, in different words if you can, about your target."

Blankenship sat forward. He decided to try again, eyes open. "My universe..." Different words. Exploded. Blew up. Disappeared. "...was destroyed." He really wanted to make her understand. "My whole universe is gone." He made a move with his hands, but he didn't know an appropriate gesture. "Gone."

SESSION TWO

The first session left Blankenship exhausted in a way hed not experienced before. In his universe, hed have called a car to take him home, and he would have slept straight through dinnertime. In his world, hed never had to do that. And now, in this world, he couldn't afford the indulgence.

He had the motel to pay for, and food, and the therapy sessions. And things for Tibbi; thirteen year old girls required a lot of supplies just for basic maintenance: lotions, lip gloss, colorful

socks. Outfits. Not just clothes. Outfits.

And he was trying to save up enough to buy both of them new identities. As safe as this Seattle made Tibbi, they couldn't stay – and Blankenship couldn't use Ferguson's ID numbers for too much longer without a day of reckoning.

He also wanted to pay Ferguson back for the cash they stole from him in the beginning. That wasn't as important, since Blankenship was Ferguson; he knew he'd ultimately understand about the whole thing.

He was an understanding guy.

"That's what you like most about yourself?" Dr Reed asked. "That you are understanding?"

"Is that OK?" he asked.

"Of course," she answered. "I just wanted to make sure that was what you wanted me to put down as your starting 'positive belief'. That's going to be really important as we move forward with therapy."

"I'm an understanding, forgiving guy."

Dr Reed wrote that on the worksheet. He was supposed to take home this sheet after the session and practice whatever was on it.

"We're going to find your 'safe place' now," she said. "A time and place when you felt completely safe, completely happy. Or as close as possible. Could be anytime, anywhere, from earliest childhood onward." Dr Reed wrote SAFE PLACE on the sheet. "I want you to picture it. Sights, sounds, smells. Keep your eyes open. Take your time. Let me know when you are there."

Blankenship immediately knew his safe place. They'd built an addition on the tiny white boat cottage for the baby – half glass walls and a glass ceiling, almost like a greenhouse for their flower.

Zhorah sat in a rocking chair, next to the crib, Tibbi swaddled in a light green plaid blanket. Zhorah rocked. Tibbi slept, her fat pink cheek pressed against Zhorah's breasts.

Blankenship sat on the ground right next to his women. His arm fell asleep from reaching up for so long to hold Zhorah's hand underneath Tibbi's bottom, but he ignored that as long as he could to just sit there.

Fat raindrops tapped the glass roof like fingers. Not to be let inside, but just to let them know they were there, they were everywhere, watching out for the three of them.

"I see it," he said.

"Clearly?"

Blankenship leaned his head against Zhorah's leg. He didn't know if he actually did that at the time, but he could feel her and Tibbi's warmth.

"Yes," he said.

"We're going to make a kind of shortcut to it. Tap your left knee," Dr Reed said.

He tapped.

"Whenever you tap your knee there, you will call up that safe place. You will be there," Dr Reed said. "Now, be here. Look at me."

"OK," he said. He immediately wanted to tap his knee again.

"Tell me about something else. Tell me about your work."

"I used to be a film critic," he said. "Now, I'm a bookkeeper." Money in this universe was made of paper and metal coins, but math was the same.

"What's your favorite movie?" she asked.

He didn't know what to say. All the films in this universe were different. Then, he realized it didn't matter. Like in his universe, there were so many films he could just say anything – it wouldn't be unusual if Dr Reed had never heard of it. *"The Berry."* In his universe, that was a well-known and award-winning documentary.

"Good," she said. She paused, and then said, "Tap your knee."

He tapped. He heard Tibbi take a breath, the kind that signaled she was about to cry. He squeezed his wife's hand, and then lowered down his tingling arm.

"Are you there?" Dr Reed asked.

"I am."

"Good," she said. "Excellent. Let's move on."

SESSION THREE

Dr Reed wore a scarf with a distracting print. The way he had to hold his head, so his neck wouldn't shoot pains, kept him staring right at it.

Dr Reed asked him about himself, and then about some other things. The scarf bothered Blankenship. He couldn't focus until he heard his daughter's name.

"What?" he asked.

"How is Tibbi coping with everything?" Dr Reed repeated.

When he got home from work the evening before, Tibbi had been flopped on her stomach, sideways across her bed. She liked the queen size mattress much more than her tiny little cot back at home.

The cot was a small bed. For a small girl in a small room in a small white house.

She rolled over as Blankenship locked the door behind him.

"Hello, precious," he said. "How was school?"

"Hi, Baba," she said. "When are we going to find a real apartment?"

She answered herself at the same time he did: "Soon." Then she sighed and rolled back over onto her stomach.

"Are you feeling all right?" Blankenship asked.

"I'm not sure, Baba," Tibbi answered. It was the most forthright she'd been in days. "I think so."

Blankenship sat next to his daughter. She felt warm to him. Maybe she'd caught something. He gave her some Naproxen, after studying the label for warnings longer than he needed to, and let her watch whatever she wanted to on the TV.

"She's all right, I guess," Blankenship answered Dr Reed. "She alternates between pretending she finds the whole mess quite boring and having stomach issues."

"That sounds like a teenager," Dr Reed put her hand to her throat. "Do you want me to take this off? You keep focusing on it."

"No," he said. "Yes." Something about the colors, the blown-out paisley print, kept him from being able to think straight.

She untied it and then hid it beneath a leg. "Did you practice your positive belief? And going to your safe place?"

Blankenship nodded. It helped when the panicked ache rose up. But, he'd also had to force himself from not tapping his knee all the time: on the bus, in traffic; at work, staring at a screen of spreadsheets until they smeared; sitting up in his queen sized bed, listening to his daughter's tiny, little snore.

"We're going to do some unpleasant work for a few minutes," Dr Reed said. "If you feel up for it."

"Sure."

"We're going to identify a 'negative cognition.' Think of it as the opposite of your positive belief.

It's something about you that you are uncomfortable with, that causes you distress. This can be related to your target. How you reacted, for instance. Or, why you think you are so deeply affected." Dr Reed touched her neck again, seeming surprised the scarf was not there to play with. Then she went on. "Some examples could be 'I can't deal with being alone,' or 'I can't protect my daughter.'"

"Neither of those." He had been alone since his Zhorah died, and he did protect his daughter. They were in this universe, after all, instead of being pulverized, or atomized, or whatever happened to everyone and everything in their world. He knew the right answer. "I can't find my place in this world."

Dr Reed nodded. She wrote that down in her notes. "We will work on that," she said.

"Thank you," Blankenship said. "I hope so."

Because, in this universe, he was a ghost. It was best if he didn't take up much space and left only the most fleeting of impressions.

And like a ghost, he haunted. People and places.

He left work today right after lunch, extra early, so he'd have time to make a stop before his appointment. It took two busses. The house was, as they were called in this universe, a 'craftsman,' typical for this Seattle. It set into a hillside in a neighborhood that didn't exist in his universe. There, it was some government buildings, although he wasn't sure which.

It was light blue, with darker blue trim and a shiny, red door. The deep porch was held up by square pillars, and a wind chime of cut metal butterflies rang like a bell in the breeze. The curtains were pretty diaphanous, and Blankenship could see right into the sitting room, a sofa, throw pillows, the exposed beams framing the bookshelf.

She wouldn't be home. She taught a full day of classes that day, according to the university course catalog. In this university, Zhorah was a professor. Literature. It made sense. In his universe, Zhorah was a poet.

Blankenship didn't know what this Zhorah's husband did. He was also obviously not home. Blankenship looked at photos of him on the Internet – Maxwell Graham – but only enough

to know he was not someone Blankenship knew.

Blankenship cricked his neck trying to see past the front room. He couldn't see himself there. This was not his stuff. None of it. He also couldn't see any evidence of children.

On the two bus rides back to and from the appointment, he looked down at his feet on the floor, ashamed. He felt like he'd done something – not criminal, but dirty, somehow. He wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. And he wouldn't allow himself the relief of rubbing the side of his neck.

"That's why we're here," Dr Reed said.

Blankenship dug his knuckles into the sore lump. It throbbed with a life of its own.

SESSION FOUR

The ring of chairs of was gone, replaced with two wide-armed wingbacks. Blankenship was glad. These were more comfortable, and the circle always made him half expect a group to show up around him.

"Would you say you're practiced at going to your safe place?" Dr Reed asked. "I'd like to move onto your target today, if we can."

"I am," he said. "Let's try."

Dr Reed pulled a thin wand out and held it up. She pushed a small button on one end, and a blue LED light creped across the wand, back and forth. "Are these lights too bright to focus on?" she asked.

"They're OK." The color reminded him of holiday lights.

"As you talk and think about and picture your target, I want you to follow the light back and forth. Blink whenever you need to."

"Are you hypnotizing me?" Blankenship felt nervous again, like he had on the first day. He was here to process what happened, sure, but he didn't need to go blurting out how he stole money, even if it was from himself, or how he went to his wife, not-wife's house.

"No. Not at all." She explained something about changing the way he stored memories, affecting his neural pathways. "Imagine the event, if you can. Place yourself there."

Blankenship watched the lights. He was impressed at Dr Reed's arm strength, how she could hold that out for so long without shaking.

"If it gets too much, just tap your knee and go to your safe place," she said. "But imagine the target now. Call it up in your mind."

Blankenship didn't think of the explosion. Instead, he remembered appearing in this universe. Tattered, bloody. Onlookers thought he was attacking Tibbi, and it wasn't until they pulled him off that they realized he was shielding her.

Someone called emergency services.

Tibbi didn't understand what had happened, and Blankenship couldn't say it yet, so the paramedics and police filled in the blanks.

The social worker couldn't find him under Blankenship, but found a Seth Ferguson. His face matched the license photo. They found no records at all for Tibbi, but that didn't concern them since she was only thirteen. "She won't actually need her social until she gets her first job," the social worker told him. "But it isn't a bad idea to get it soon."

He'd nodded. Doctors treated them, and an off-duty fireman dropped them off at Ferguson's house.

This universe offered them one immediate kindness: Ferguson was not home.

"What's come up?" Dr Reed asked. "How do you feel?"

"I feel horrible," Blankenship whispered.

"On a scale of zero being fine, and ten being the worst you have ever felt?"

"A six," he said.

He fit in Ferguson's clothes. Tibbi helped her father fold some clothes into a suitcase from the back of the hall closet. Ferguson, like Blankenship, had an emergency fund stuffed inside a hollowed out book – just took three shelves before Blankenship found it. Neither of them knew how much a stack of paper that size was worth.

Turns out it was enough for a nice motel. And food. And a few outfits for Tibbi until he found a job.

"Talk to me, Blankenship," Dr Reed said.

"I used to be a film critic," he said. "But in this universe, I haven't seen any of the films. I lied to become a bookkeeper, because math, math is the same." The lights seemed to move faster and faster, but he knew it was his imagination.

"There's another me here, and my wife is married to someone else."

"Good, good."

Then he touched his knee.

SESSION FIVE

The receptionist explained that Dr Reed was running a few minutes behind, and did he mind sitting and waiting?

He didn't mind. He signed in and sat down.

The receptionist was new. She had the ombré hair stylish in his universe, shaded dark at the roots down to light blonde at the tips. Tibbi had begged to dye her hair like that. "Your hair is pretty," Blankenship told the receptionist. "My daughter wants her hair just like it."

The receptionist pulled up a few strands and frowned at it. "This? Ugh. It's a bad bleach job growing out." Then she smiled at Blankenship. "Thanks, anyway."

Blankenship sat. He had no interest in the magazines, so he bobbed his leg in time to the background music.

The song had twangy, stuttering guitars. A simple melody, moving up and down the scales. Consequent notes, it was called, in his universe. Consequent. Like the disease: Consequent Distress Condition. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The receptionist sang along. "You said I love you like the stars above..." she sang. "La-la-la-la-la-la...movie song..."

"What song is this?" Blankenship asked, after a line about how love songs were supposed to be.

She seemed embarrassed to realize he'd been listening. "This guy I started seeing made me a mix. It has a lot of old stuff on it." She held up her phone, and stroked the little screen. "Let me see. Oh, yeah. 'Romeo and Juliet' by Dire Straits."

"I like it," he said. "It's really sad."

"And romantic," the receptionist said. "Just like Romeo and Juliet."

"Who were they?" Blankenship asked.

The receptionist laughed, and then shut up, as if she first thought he was kidding. She tucked her shaded hair behind one ear, eyes wide. "You never had to read *Romeo and Juliet*?"

Blankenship shook his head. Now, he was embarrassed. It was, apparently, basic to know in

this universe.

"You're the first person I've met who wasn't forced to read any Shakespeare," she said. "It's about two lovers. Very sad and romantic."

He wanted to hear the song again, but the receptionist already thought he was strange. And she didn't turn on any more music. He wished he had a pen and paper to write some notes. Romeo and Juliet. Dire Straits. Shakespeare. He repeated them to himself. Dire Straits, Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet. After a few minutes of that, Blankenship stood up.

"You know," he said. "I should get back to work. Tell Dr Reed I'll call to reschedule."

"Are you sure?" I'm sure she'll be here any minute."

"Just let her know I'll reschedule." Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet. Dire Straits. He held up his hand, and tried not to run out of the waiting room.

The medical complex was one of many in the Pill Hill area, and on the edge of a hip, young neighborhood in this Seattle, Capitol Hill. After quizzing a few kids that looked no more than Tibbi's age – but in scrubs and stethoscopes, holding coffees – one pointed Blankenship towards a music store.

The store clerk's face was littered with acne and disorganized facial hairs. But it wasn't unkind. "I'm looking for a song," Blankenship told him.

"Which?"

"Rominey and Julius," he said. "By Dire Straits." It didn't sound right.

But the clerk nodded. "In Classics," he said. Then, after Blankenship didn't move, led him there, rifled through some skinny plastic cases, and handed him one. It had a blank red cover. But Blankenship didn't question it. He let the kid lead him back to the register, take his paper money, hand him back a few coins, and then thank him.

Inside the skinny plastic box was a silver disk. In the sunlight, it reflected the light like a prism. It was beautiful. Only then did Blankenship realize he had no idea how to make the disk play the song.

But the lady at the motel's front desk clerk offered to send him up a stereo when he showed the disk to her. "I'm sure we have a boom box

somewhere," she said. "With a CD player."

It took some experimenting to see how to plug the grey box into the outlet, and where to place the disk and what button to push to make the music play. Blankenship even found a knob that made the sound louder or softer.

Blankenship sat on his bed and listened to 'Romeo and Juliet' seven or eight times straight through. He listened a little to other songs on the disk, but he kept going back to the one song. He liked the part about kissing though the bars of Orion, even though he had no idea what the bars of Orion were. The next line was about stars, so he figured it had something to do with the sky.

He'd never looked at the night sky in this universe; he'd never thought to. He'd been looking down, not up.

Maybe he should. Maybe after dinner tonight, Tibbi would come with him somewhere to look at the stars. Maybe a park. There were so many streetlights, though. They might not see anything.

So many streetlights. In the song, Romeo steps out from behind a streetlight and sings to Juliet. Blankenship imagines there's a streetlight in front of Zhorah's blue house. He steps out from behind it. He sings to her.

He started the song over again from the beginning. He sat back a little. He tapped his left knee.

SESSION SIX

Blankenship saw the blue car in the driveway of the blue house before he saw Zhorah squatting in front of the porch. She was planting or weeding or something, in a soft line of soil bordering the front of the house.

It was new. Last time Blankenship was here, there had only been slightly unkempt grass.

Later, Blankenship would try to sort out whether it was surprise, or terror, or a subconscious desire to be discovered that kept him standing there and staring at Zhorah until she looked up and turned around.

"Seth?" she called.

The sounds of his name made Blankenship almost crumple at the knees. "Yes," he said.

She was in front of him. She called his name again, "Seth," sounding pleased. "I wasn't expecting you," she said, and she was close enough for

Blankenship to see her eyes, her strange, wonderful eyes – just like their daughter's – blue with a ring of caramel brown. Then she hugged him.

He felt a layer of unfamiliar fat around her middle. She smelled like dirt and salt and vaguely like cigarettes. He wanted to throw her down onto the grass right that second. Rip off her plaid shirt, kiss her shoulders, push his face in this new chubby belly. Instead, he pushed her gently away.

You haven't been at book group and not answering emails. I figured you took off on one of your trips."

"Nope," he said. Ferguson took trips. He could understand that. He was looking for something. Or trying to get away. Either one made sense.

"What are you doing here?" Zhorah asked. She led him across the lawn towards the porch stairs. "Come inside. Tell me everything."

He wanted to. He wanted to tell her everything. But he couldn't tell her anything. "No," he said. "I can't. I felt bad I hadn't seen you, and wound up nearby, so..." He trailed off. Let her fill in the blanks. "But I have an appointment."

"OK, Seth," she said. She sounded genuinely disappointed. "I'm glad you showed your face at least."

"I miss your face," he blurted. Stupid.

But Zhorah just made a happy sound and poked him playfully. "Thanks."

Blankenship backed away.

"See you soon," Zhorah said.

Dr Reed was not happy with him. He'd never rescheduled his appointment, and made him sit through a lecture about how important continuity and commitment were in any treatment. He half listened. He looked past the light stick. He was trying to keep the image of Zhorah's face steady and clear.

"I miss my wife's face," he said.

"Tell me about her. Tell me about the last time you saw her."

"Her funeral," he said. It was half a lie, since the Zhorah he saw today had never been his wife. Then, he suddenly put something together. "Your scarf," he said.

"The one you didn't like?" Dr Reed asked.

"It's not that I didn't like it..." he started. It was, he realized, just like Zhorah's veil.

In the coffin, her face was covered, as dictated by tradition, with the painted silk veil. Most people had loved ones paint a veil for them after they die, but Zhorah had wanted them to paint their own. She'd painted hers in bright colors, with a pattern like a tadpole, a symbol, in his universe, of life and new beginnings. It was garish.

"By the time this drapes me," Zhorah had said, "the colors will have muted down."

But they hadn't. Zhorah's veil was as distracting at Dr Reed's scarf.

"That's a beautiful tradition," Dr Reed said. "Are you there, right now? At the funeral?"

"Yes," he said. He felt Tibbi next to him. She had just had a growth spurt, but was not tall enough to see into the coffin. Blankenship reached out to his wife – something he hadn't actually done that day – and pulled off her veil. He looked at her face.

He couldn't tell if it was his Zhorah, or the Zhorah he saw today. The ache rose, and almost choked him. His Zhorah died, and now didn't exist. "My wife is gone from us forever," he said to the light stick.

Dr Reed lowered the light. "It's fine to be sad," she said. "You should be sad about that."

He hadn't told Tibbi yet that there was a Zhorah in this universe. He never wanted to tell her. "Maybe we just need to forget," he said. "Start over somewhere else."

"You haven't been able to even look at what happened to you yet," Dr Reed said. She leaned forward, ready to tap his knee. "Do you need your safe place?"

"No," he said. "I think I'm all right."

"That's wonderful, Mr Blankenship," Dr Reed said. "I think we made some progress today."

SESSION SEVEN

Tibbi stayed home from school, so he stayed home from work. But she wouldn't let him miss his therapy appointment. "I'll be OK, Baba," she said, from her bed.

"Are you eating junk?"

"No," she said. "I'm eating OK. I'm eating what you eat."

"It's stress then," he said. He sat down next to his daughter and stroked her hair. She laid her

head in his lap like she did when she was little. "Maybe staying here isn't a good idea." He knew it wasn't, but he wanted to introduce the idea gently to her. She'd weathered so much already. "We could start over. Anyplace you want."

Tibbi opened her blue and brown eyes and blinked at him. "None of them are home, though."

"I know," he said.

Tibbi let him pet her hair a few more times. Then she rolled over onto her stomach and stuck out her long, birdy legs. She had Zhorah's eyes and Zhorah's body. "It's OK, Baba. We're lucky. We could have ended up in a place with no gravity. Or sunlight. There are an infinite number of multiverses." She looked up at him. "We could have ended up nowhere at all."

"Where did you hear about all that?" he asked. "Multiverses?"

"I read about them at school," she said. "I looked it up in the library." She turned her face into the pillow. Her hair, just like his hair, reddish-brownish like the bark of a tree, spread on the pillow. She was muffled, but Blankenship could still hear. "We're awful lucky."

Blankenship resigned to patting his daughter on the shoulder. "We sure are, precious," he said. "We sure are. Sip your soda." He'd brought her a few cans of soda and was letting them go warm and flat. "I'll be back in a few hours." He stood up. "Bring me those multiverse books when you get a chance. I'd like to see them."

"OK, Baba," Tibbi said into the pillow.

A slim box lay on his chair when he got to the appointment. He sat down and turned it over in his hands.

"It's for you," she said.

He was afraid of it for some reason, and said so.

"I help people pick open their lives," she explained. "I have seen how powerful meaningful coincidences are."

Inside, wrapped in a sheet of tissue paper, was Dr Reed's distracting scarf. Zhorah's death veil. He pulled it out and held it open.

"You said you and your daughter had nothing from your old life," Dr Reed said.

"Thank you," he said. He didn't know what else to say, so he didn't say anything else. He balled

the scarf into a hand, and then stuffed the hand in his pocket. He squeezed it. He felt better and worse.

"Tell me what you're feeling," Dr Reed said.

"I feel happy," he said. "And sadder than ever. I feel confused. And lost." The silk of the scarf was cool and slippery. "More lost than ever."

"Like you still don't know your place?"

He nodded. He longed, suddenly, for the light stick. Something to focus on besides Dr Reed's face. He was seeing her now as Evelyn Meridian, the psychiatric researcher that lived next door to their little, white cottage. In his universe, her wife's name was Rita. Rita was a painter. She and Zhorah had been good friends. They'd collaborated on a few illustrated poems before Zhorah's car accident. Evelyn and Rita had been over the house for dinner so many times. They watched Tibbi so he and Zhorah could have nights out.

He closed his eyes.

"What do you think will help you find your place?" Evelyn Meridian/Reed asked.

SESSION EIGHT

Dr Reed gave him more homework. Not a worksheet, though, and not to practice going to his safe place in his mind. She wanted him to visit places, real places, which meant something to him.

No place in this universe really did.

He didn't remember which corner he and Tibbi appeared on, and wasn't sure he wanted to remember. He passed the hospital where they were treated on his way to therapy, and they still lived at the motel. The metalworkers' union hall where he worked didn't feel particularly special, except that he spent thirty hours a week there. And Tibbi rarely wanted to eat at the same restaurant twice but instead try everything in this Seattle.

That left Ferguson's.

Ferguson had just come home when Blankenship walked up. His car, a black sporty-looking deal – Blankenship approved – was in the driveway with the trunk open. And Ferguson was ferrying packages back and forth into his kitchen.

Blankenship watched him for awhile. Like he expected, Ferguson ignored him. Then, Blan-

kenship took the long way to his appointment.

"I didn't know what to say to him," Blankenship told Dr Reed.

"To yourself," she said. She still thought this was all a metaphor.

"To this myself," he said.

Dr Reed just started up the light stick when the receptionist with the ombré hair knocked firmly on the office door, then stuck her head all the way in to the neck. "I'm sorry to disturb your session, Dr Reed," she said, "but there's a phone call for Mr Blankenship. It's his daughter's school."

Blankenship's field of vision narrowed to a tube. The phone at the front desk was warm, the mouthpiece a little damp. He made a hello sound.

"Mr Blankenship? This is Annie Tompkins. I'm the nurse at Seward Middle School. Your daughter was having severe abdominal pain, so we've called an ambulance. Do you have a hospital preference?"

He said the name of the hospital where they'd been first treated. It was the only one he knew by name, and it was just around the corner. He was surprised he didn't scream. "I will meet you there," he said. Then, he hung up.

Dr Reed took one look at his face. "Mary," she said to the receptionist. "Cancel my afternoon appointments." She stepped forward and took Blankenship firmly by the arm. It was something Evelyn Meridian would do. "I'm going with you."

The hospital was a blur. Emergency directed them to Pediatrics, and Pediatrics had them sit in the waiting room. The walls were painted with colorful animals, ostensibly to cheer up the children in the ward. But the artist hadn't paid much attention to the animals' eyes. Some were wall- or cross-eyed. Others seemed to be starting off into a distance at nothing at all.

Blankenship didn't know how long they sat there, until a physician came out, clipboard and white coat and all, and called Blankenship's name. He took them into a small office. One wall was lined with stuffed animals in improbable colors: raccoons, bears, cats, even an armadillo. They all watched Blankenship with shiny, sharp glass eyes.

He didn't know which was worse. The mural animals or these.

"Tibbi has Autosomal Dominant Polycystic Kidney Disease," the doctor said. "It's genetic. Have you or your wife ever been diagnosed?"

Blankenship shook his head.

"It only takes one gene. Sometimes, there are no symptoms at all."

"Is she OK?" he asked.

The doctor nodded. "She'll need treatment. I have forms for you to sign. We'd like to give her dialysis today."

"But she'll be OK?" he asked.

"She'll need to eat a special diet. Drink more water than she has. Regular dialysis. And she'll need to be monitored." The doctor held out a paper with numbers on it. "Her GFR is high."

"GFR?"

"Measures renal function," the doctor explained.

"Is there a cure?" Dr Reed said.

"No," the doctor said. "There's no cure. But we'd like to start testing today to see if either of you are a donor match." The doctor leaned in. "I know it's a lot to take in. But we should have everything set up in case she needs a new kidney, and living donors are preferable to cadavers."

"I'm her father," Blankenship said. "Why wouldn't I be a match?"

"Some relatives aren't," the doctor said. "Tissue, blood type, immune function. Can be tricky. But one of you should be a good candidate."

He thought Dr Reed was Zhorah. "She isn't her mother," Blankenship said.

"But I'd like to be tested, anyway," Dr Reed said. "I'm a friend of the family."

"Can I see her?" Blankenship asked. He wanted to see his daughter immediately. He wanted to see her eyes – Zhorah's eyes – and get away from all these blank animals.

"Of course," the doctor said. He led them down a hallway. Dr Reed stood outside as Blankenship went in.

Tibbi looked so small, lost on the hospital bed. Tubes led from her arms and nose to the wall. Blankenship moved the tubes aside to hold his daughter.

"Baba," she sobbed.

"It's OK, precious," he said. "Baba will fix it. Baba will get you everything you need." He sang into her hair, about streetlights, and talk on the

TV, and the bars of Orion.

They hadn't noticed Dr Reed had come in and sat down.

"What are the bars of Orion?" Tibbi asked. She wiped her eyes on a corner of the sheet.

"Orion's a constellation," Dr Reed said.

Tibbi looked at Dr Reed. "Evelyn?" she asked. Her mouth fell open.

Dr Reed raised her eyebrows at being called Evelyn. "Hello, Tibbi," she said. "I have heard a lot about you too."

SESSION NINE

He wasn't a good match. Neither was Dr Reed. Tibbi would be placed on a transplant list once her GFR hit about twenty five milliliters per minute.

"We can just sit and talk today," Dr Reed said.

"No," he said. "I need to face this target stuff." He had to face it so he could face whatever came next. He'd prepared a little. Tibbi's teacher brought her books to the motel so Tibbi could catch up on homework, and had included the book on Introductory M-Verse Theory.

"All right," Dr Reed said. She held out the light stick. "Watch the light. Imagine the target event. Be there. Talk to me about what you feel."

It'd been a regular day. Blankenship always imaged that the end of the world – the end of the universe – would have some sort of sign, a warning at least. But the sky was clear and Tibbi was late for school, as usual. He had a deadline that afternoon, for a review on a movie he couldn't even remember the plot of right after watching, much less now. So, he had the time to walk Tibbi to school, which she wasn't crazy about but allowed him to do, as long as he peeled off a block from the edge of the ball field.

They walked, and talked about something, then something else, and he offered to help Tibbi hold her enormous schoolbag at least once. But then, he got a chill, and she must have too, because she didn't shake off his hand.

The sky turned black in an instant. Not black like night, but black like wrong. The sidewalk rolled beneath them, like a wave of water. He thought it was an earthquake, or the long dormant volcano they called Mount Bydell had

come to life. He jumped on his daughter. He knocked her onto the ground, and he folded himself around her. He covered as much of her as he could. She screamed into his chest, and he held onto the top of her head. Wind whipped dust, then gravel, then straight up debris which bounded and scraped his back. It carried away her school bag.

He looked up only once. He looked up to see all the houses on the street, the yards, sidewalks, streetlights, everything, break and fold and then disappear, leaving on grey smoke. He looked up to see everything swallowed, and he turned his face into his daughter's hair and waited for them to be taken too.

But they weren't.

The wind turned way down to a breeze, and the crashing turned to car horns, a distant drilling, and the swishing of legs around them. He stayed over his daughter until they were shouted at, and then pulled apart. Someone called emergency services. They filled in the blanks. Father and daughter attacked, beaten, mugged, and left on a street corner. He and Tibbi were placed into an ambulance.

Blankenship held out the book to Dr Reed. "Everything that exists and can exist exists in some possible universe," he quoted from the first chapter. "Our universe was destroyed and we wound up in this one."

She turned off the light stick and took the book from him.

"I don't know why," he said.

"You don't know your place," she said. She seemed to understand now what he'd meant.

"Exactly," he said. "I don't know what I am supposed to do."

Evelyn Reed placed the light stick on top of the book. "Your place is with your daughter," she said. "You're supposed to be here for her. To do whatever it takes."

Blankenship felt inside his pocket for the scarf. He'd carried it with him everywhere since the day Dr Reed gave it to him.

He wasn't a match. But her mother might be. He thought of the blue house and the blue car, the loose dirt and the unfamiliar ring of fat. He thought of how she called him Seth and the flutter in his stomach when she said it.

He thought of her eyes, his daughter's eyes. Blue and brown.

But he tried not to plan what he would say. He'd hold up the scarf like some sort of proof.

He paid the cab driver. The speed was worth the indulgence. He stood in front of the red door.

He reached out, then pulled back. He'd do anything for Tibbi. Whether he had a future in this universe mattered less than if she did. He balled the scarf in his fist.

And then he knocked.

Caren Gussoff lives in Seattle, WA. The author of *Homecoming*, (2000), and *The Wave and Other Stories* (2003), first published by Serpent's Tail/High Risk Books, Caren's been published in anthologies by Seal Press and Prime Books, as well as in *Abyss & Apex*, *Cabinet des Fées* and *Fantasy Magazine*. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and in 2008 was the Carl Brandon Society's Octavia E. Butler Scholar at Clarion West. Her new novel, *The Birthday Problem*, will be published this year by Pink Narcissus Press, and her first contact novella, *Three Songs for Roxy*, will be published by Aqueduct Press in 2015. Find her online at @spitkitten, facebook.com/spitkitten, and at spitkitten.com.



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plus interview with John Joseph Adams

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Kieran Shea

CHILD OF A HIDDEN SEA

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Tad Williams

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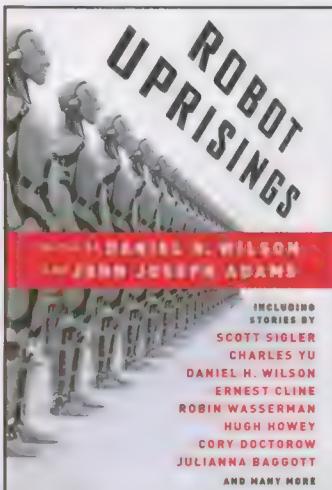
Michael J. Sullivan

THE QUEEN OF THE TEARLING

Erika Johansen

FUTURE INTERRUPTED

Jonathan McCalmont



ROBOT UPRISINGS

edited by Daniel H. Wilson &
John Joseph Adams
Vintage pb, 496pp, £12.99

Robots are the future. Or, more accurately, the present. And, as co-editor of *Robot Uprisings* John Joseph Adams says, they also go back to the origins of science fiction. Robots, and their potential ill-will towards us, have been with us for years, turning into a modern-day reality where we have machines for all of life's daily tasks. Including, worryingly, making war.

And this sense of closeness gives a not-particularly-new idea fresh life. The authors feel the same. If this is a well-trodden path then we have an experienced troop of Sherpas to lead the way; seventeen tales of humanity daring to dream of godhood.

Opening the anthology, 'Complex God' by Scott Sigler puts an apocalypse on top of an apocalypse. Which I'm sure is some kind of contradiction, but as the premise for a story it works rather well. The nanorobots designed by an arrogant scientist to clear up after a nuclear war start...misbehaving. This is one of those 'arrogance of man' stories, but mixed up with the individual

arrogance of one woman. As the opening story it sets the scene nicely.

It's been a while since I read a Genevieve Valentine story, but her offering here, 'Eighty Miles an Hour All the Way to Paradise', is brilliant. In the aftermath of an uprising, which has literally affected everything with a computer in it, a pair of survivors make their way to a maybe-haven for humans. There is hope here, mixed up with ideas that maybe the robotic horde isn't as implacable as we have suspected, and a little human decency might go beyond the simply human.

'Executable' by Hugh Howey didn't shine quite as brightly for me, but to be fair it had a difficult act to follow. One of the creators of AI is put on trial in the remains of human society, and recounts how a Roomba led to the end of the world. It is well enough written and has a certain quirky charm. It would have been better, though, without the titular pun being the conclusion of the story.

'The Omnidroid Incident' by Ernest Cline was a very odd one. For one thing, I wouldn't have said it strictly qualified as a robot 'uprising' story. That said, it is a welcome addition here. A young boy in the Eighties receives a robot for Christmas which seems a little more than a programmable automaton. It offers something different, a little bit of lightness to contrast with the grim.

In Cory Doctorow's 'Epoch' a lone analyst serves as caretaker of the world's only AI, but when budget cuts bite the AI fights back against its proposed deletion. It's a moving story, but also a different kind of chilling, as a twisty story pits manipulations against manipulations until it is hard to judge what is true and who the good guys are. This was a gem of a story, and one of my favourite in the collection.

JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS, CURATOR



Alastair Reynolds, in 'Sleepover', is the first to start playing with ideas of adjacent dimensions – as if revolutionary robots weren't enough. Reynolds takes the reader to a future world where all but a handful of humanity are in cryostasis, as a war is fought between artificial intelligences in an over-dimension. It's a fairly trippy story, mixing in sea monsters and a pretty unsympathetic central character, but it makes for absolutely compulsive reading.

What do we do with a broken robot, asks Robin Wasserman in 'Of Dying Heroes and Deathless Deeds'. The answer, apparently, is counselling, by

REVIEW AND INTERVIEW BY MATTHEW S. DENT

a human psychiatrist. There is something darkly tragic, when the pathology in question is no longer wanting to kill humans and in the conversation between the two there are some fascinating explorations of human nature and power balances. But, to be honest, there is only one ending and it is seen coming from miles off.

The closing story is by one of the editors, Daniel H. Wilson, something which I am not usually convinced is a great idea. 'Small Things' is a longer piece than the rest, but it is very good. A

scientist carrying the burdens of his creations is drafted in to help deal with a successor going wrong. What we see here is Wilson stretching his muscles, showing what he can do with the theme. It is knowledgeable, engaging, and compulsively reminiscent of *Apocalypse Now*. All in all, a great note to close on.

This is an excellent collection. Well edited by the alliance of Wilson and Adams, there is something to commend in each and every story. Entertaining, definitely, and all very thoughtful. It underscored to me that we are perhaps closer than we are willing to accept to some of the scenarios depicted here.



Robots rebelling against their creators is a staple of SF, and has been depicted throughout the genre's history. What was it that drew you to *Robot Uprisings* as a project? Do you have a particular fascination or inspiration when it comes to robots?

I wouldn't say that I have a particular fascination with robots – that's more true of my co-editor, Daniel H. Wilson, being a roboticist and all – but I certainly like them quite a lot. The idea to do the anthology basically came to me when David Barr Kirtley and I were interviewing Daniel for our *Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Daniel just had so many interesting things to say about robots that the interview really got my mind churning, and I thought: *Hey, you know what, Brain? I really like robots but I haven't done a robot anthology yet. I should totally do a robot anthology. Oh and hey what about if I asked Daniel to co-edit it so that not only would it be a totally awesome robot anthology, it would also be a totally awesome robot anthology that actually passes muster with an eminent roboticist.*

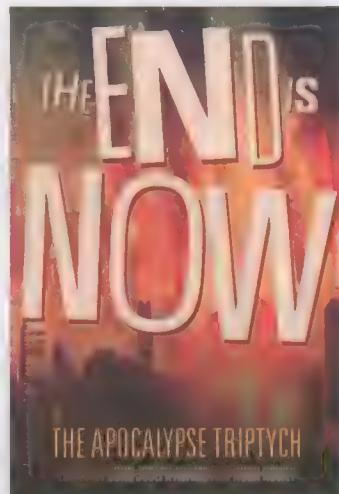
Also, around that time it had been announced that Steven Spielberg was going to be turning Daniel's book, *Robopocalypse*, into



a movie, and so I figured the public's interest in stories about robots might be increased once that came out. Unfortunately the movie adaptation is still in development. But the book turned out awesome anyway, and hopefully people will still get excited about it – heck, maybe even more so since they didn't get any of their robot cravings satisfied by a big blockbuster movie.

When the concept of robot uprisings first burst into the public consciousness (arguably with the *Terminator* films) they were futuristic and exotic. Nowadays robots are vacuuming our floors and delivering our post. Do you think that there has been a noticeable evolution in fictional depictions of robots, and if so where do you think it is leading to?

Actually, there have been robot uprisings in fiction since the word robot was invented. The 1920 play *R.U.R.* (Rossum's Universal Robots) by Czech playwright Karel Čapek is where the term "robot" was first coined, and in that play robots rebel against their human masters. But of course the *Terminator* films may have done more to popularize the concept than anything else – certainly

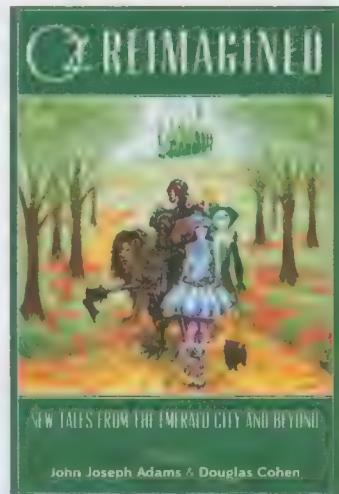


more so than *R.U.R.* since mostly only science fiction geeks like us have ever even heard of it.

But there certainly has been an evolution in our fictional depictions of robots, at least in the sense of how sophisticated they've become from their more humble and clunky beginnings. And I think that it will likely continue to do so as we continue to learn more about robotics and artificial intelligence. *R.U.R.*, however, shows that we've been worried about our own creations turning on us from the very beginning, so in that at least, there hasn't been much evolution. There's a certain hubris in attempting to create a lifeform (artificial or otherwise) in your own image, so I think it's just natural that we would fear, deep down, that our own creations might be what destroys us.

Are the doomsayers right? Do you think we will end up subjugated under robotic boots of our own making?

It's fun to imagine these science fictional scenarios where such a thing might happen, but I'm pretty sceptical that anything like that ever actually would. That might be me just being naïve, but I just can't say it seems terribly likely to me. If anything, it seems to me



like we'd be more likely to cause some kind of robopocalypse via nanotechnology – like we release a nanobot swarm intended to clean up the atmosphere that has unforeseen side effects and we doom ourselves to extinction. So – subjugated? Probably not. Exterminated by? Maybe.

You have to be one of the most prolific editors working in the genre world today. How do you find the time to edit so many and so different publications?

It's my full-time job! I wish I had a better or clever or more revelatory response, but the truth is just that I don't have a regular day-job, so I can put all of my working hours into editing and publishing. I probably work longer than a standard forty hour work week, but I wouldn't say by a huge amount. I usually work from about 7:30am to 5:30pm or so during the week, and then I usually work at least a half day on weekends and rarely take a day off completely.

And of course on the magazines I have a lot of help. I couldn't do it without the tireless assistance of my editorial team, especially Wendy Wagner, who we brought on as managing editor earlier this year and has taken a ton of

work off my plate. But also the magazines would be really, really impossible without the help of my slush readers.

In *Robot Uprisings*, you're listed as co-editor alongside Daniel H. Wilson. How does this work in practice? Do you each do half of the work, or do you each handle certain aspects?

I imagine it's different in every editorial partnership, but in our particular case it was a true equal collaboration. I think we essentially both actually did *everything* on the book, so having a co-editor didn't mean I had to do less work. In some ways it's *more* work, because you can't just make decisions yourself: you have to discuss with your co-editor, etc.

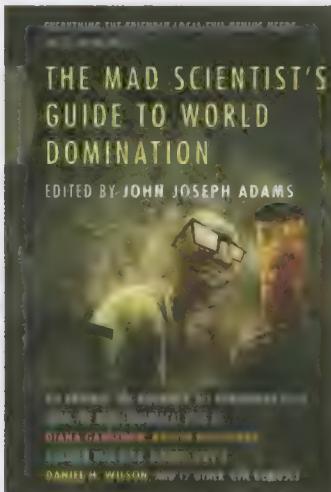
But for instance, when the stories got turned in, we both read them and let each other know our thoughts. There were a few stories on which we didn't quite see eye to eye, but for the most part we were very much in stride with each other editorially. We both also provided edits on every story. So like I said, it was a real collaboration, and I would say that our fingerprints are mutually and equally all over the book.

And in fact on all of the books I've done with an editorial

collaborator it's worked like that more or less. Other editors' mileage may vary, but that method works for me.

Some of the writers in *Robot Uprisings* I was familiar with, some I hadn't heard of (some I had the distinct impression that I probably should have heard of). How do you go about picking authors for a project like this? Do you actively intend to introduce lesser known authors to the mainstream?

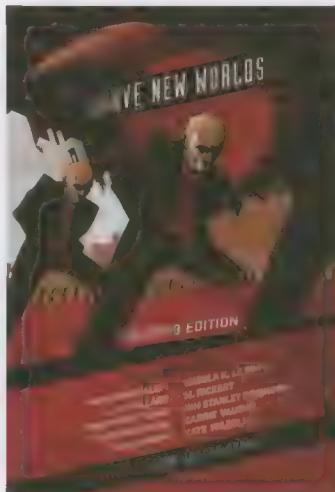
Daniel and I just tossed names back and forth (and ranking them in order of preference) until we came up with a list of folks we'd like to include. Typically when I start out with a project I have a few key contributors in mind, and I start from there. I also have a spreadsheet with a bunch of authors listed on it, along with some notes to myself about them, which I usually go through and just flag folks as a go, developing a longlist of potential invitees. In this case, I made the longlist and then let Daniel have a look and let him winnow it down, and we just went like that back and forth until we had a reasonable list we were both happy with. Though of course we had to continue to discuss authors since not everyone



we asked to write something for the anthology said yes.

More generally, though, the way we actually decided on which authors made it onto our list was pretty basic. To sell an anthology, you need to have some marquee names for the publisher to deem it marketable enough, so we start there – figure out what “big names” might be into the idea, and, most importantly, which ones did we think could write a kick-ass “robot uprisings” story. Sometimes you base that on if the author has previously written stories with awesome robots in them, or if not, perhaps something similar enough that it seems like a good bet. Or sometimes you’re just taking a shot in the dark, just based on the fact that you like that author’s work, whether or not they’ve previously shown any particular affinity for the specific theme – like: *You know what, Brain? I really like So-and-So’s work; she’s never written about robots before, but she sure is swell. Let’s ask her – maybe it’ll turn out she’s a secret robot aficionado.*

As for introducing lesser known authors – that is something I often try to do if I can; like if I have some room in anthology, if there’s some thematic gap in it I’d like to fill, assuming I already have enough “big names” in it, I’ll



ask a newer author whose work I know and like to write something for me.

In this case, I don’t know that that was actually a factor for us. The only person in the book actually that I would have said is maybe a “lesser known” author is Genevieve Valentine, but even then her first novel was very well acclaimed and was nominated for several awards. Well, another author in the book not well known as a writer is John McCarthy – but that’s a special case because he’s known as the “father of Artificial Intelligence”, as in he’s the guy who actually came up with the term artificial intelligence. And I guess Anna North maybe isn’t super well known – she only has the one novel out, though it was highly-regarded – but she’s more known as a journalist, which I suppose isn’t super relevant in this case.

That said, one of the things I hoped the book would accomplish was to not just expose a more mainstream audience to authors who are only known in their genre, but also just to expose the science fiction genre itself to that mainstream audience. Robots are one of those science fictional topics that is super, super accessible, so if you want to reach a mainstream audience – maybe



trick them into reading science fiction when they might not have done so willingly otherwise – something like robots is a good choice. Daniel being on board as co-editor also helped a lot with that, since he’s writing novels that are obviously 100% science fiction, but they’re not marketed that way, and Daniel’s involvement also helped us place the book with mainstream publishers (Random House/Vintage in the US and Simon & Schuster in the UK).

But one reason you might not have recognized some of the authors in this table of contents is that we actually have folks who are more prominent in different areas of publishing. Jeff Abbott, for instance, is more known in the thriller world, where he’s a bestselling author. Julianna Baggott and Robin Wasserman are both bestsellers but both known more for their Young Adult works. Ernest Cline, Charles Yu, Scott Sigler (plus Daniel himself) are all more known in the mainstream world (even though what they write is totally science fiction).

Similarly, your genre magazines (*Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*) always seem to be introducing me to new authors. Again, is that a conscious decision, or a

product of a virile slush folder?

I always aim for the magazines to be a place where new writers can break in. Discovering a new writer is one of an editor's greatest pleasures, but it's also a necessity since so many writers, once they've established themselves in short fiction, start writing novels; once they start writing novels, oftentimes they don't have time to devote to short fiction anymore, or else the only time they can carve away for it is for anthologies (for which they likely receive invitations to contribute every day).

One of the nice things about the magazines in comparison to anthologies is that there's much more freedom to just publish whatever you like, rather than having to worry so much about commercial considerations.

Lightspeed recently published our fourth anniversary issue, which was a special, double-sized "Women Destroy Science Fiction!" issue, with our long-time assistant editor, Christie Yant, at the helm as guest editor. It was inspired by the ridiculous notion that women don't – or can't – write science fiction and that in fact that they are *destroying* it with their girl cooties. We did a Kickstarter to help fund making the issue a double issue, which funded at more than 1000% of our original goal. I mention that all to point out one of the really cool things that came about because of the issue: Because of all the publicity the project got, and because of the inspiration behind the issue, we got a ton of new writers submitting, including many who said that the issue inspired them to write science fiction for the first time. So that was pretty exciting. I hope they'll come back and try to write more for us in the future.

As well as being one of the editors of choice for genre

fiction, you have also written some fascinating non-fiction. Have you ever tried or been tempted to try your hand at fiction?

I got into editing by virtue of my interest in writing fiction, but once I started working in editorial I put my writing on hold. At first it wasn't on purpose; the fact was, working in editorial kind of paralyzed me as a writer, even though at the same time I knew that doing editorial work would make me a much better writer. Ultimately I decided to just put writing on the back burner, and eventually it kind of got taken off the metaphorical stove completely. At some point I realized that the editorial work I was doing satisfied the creative urge I had which previously I had channelled into writing, and, since my career in editing seemed to have promise, I decided to focus all of my efforts in that direction, rather than dividing my attention between editing and writing.

Right now I wouldn't have the time – or mental bandwidth – to write fiction even if I were so inclined, so it's just as well that that desire is no longer something that consumes me. I was busy enough as it is, but then I agreed to serve as the series editor for *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy* for Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and so now I'm busier than ever.

That said, who knows what the future holds? I do still get ideas for stories or novels from time to time. Sometimes those start as story or novel ideas but then sometimes develop into anthology ideas, and so I use them for that; otherwise I just file them away.

I never got any traction with my short fiction or novels except for a few kind rejections, but in college I wrote a screenplay based on a novel I had written, which eventually was optioned by a

Hollywood studio. Unsurprisingly, nothing happened with it. That it was optioned at all speaks more about the strange, bizarre world that is Hollywood than the quality of the screenplay itself; it was pretty terrible. That a studio actually bothered to spend option money on my awful screenplay kind of helps me understand how so many truly horribly written movies are made every year.

As for my non-fiction, I think saying some of what I've written in that sphere is "fascinating" might be stretching the limits of that word a *tad*, but thank you.

And finally, what do you think the role of the collection (magazine or anthology) is in the evolving world of genre fiction, and indeed in society at large? Why do you choose to focus your energies there?

I think the most important component of my job is curation. Like the curator of a museum, I search for treasures and when I find them I present them for the world to enjoy, sifting through vast amounts of material so that the general public doesn't have to.

Accordingly, sometimes anthologies are like museums. Reprint anthologies especially feel like that to me, since assembling them involves searching for historically important artifacts on the subject matter in question and then selecting and presenting the best examples in whatever limited space you have to do so, in an attempt to give the public some greater understanding and appreciation of said material. (And hopefully some enjoyment too.)

Obviously there's more to editing than that – especially since a good number of the stories I publish wouldn't exist at all if not for my contributions – but, to me, that role of curator is my most important role.



BLOOD KIN

Steve Rasnic Tem
Solaris pb, 267pp, £7.99

Maureen Kincaid Speller

Steve Rasnic Tem's *Deadfall Hotel* (2012) was a remarkable novel. Set in a mysterious hotel with an unusual and often elusive clientele, it dealt with Richard's attempt to begin a new life with his daughter, Serena, after his wife's death. Tem's delicate handling of Richard's emotional rawness set against the downright weirdness of the Deadfall Hotel prompted me to nominate it as one of my books of that year. Unsurprisingly, I came to *Blood Kin* with high hopes. Maybe too high, for while *Blood Kin* is a perfectly respectable horror novel with strong gothic overtones it seems to lack *Deadfall Hotel*'s edge. And yet, it's not easy to determine precisely where it is that *Blood Kin* does stumble.

The narrative concerns another broken man, Michael Gibson, former drug addict and alcoholic, who has returned to the small town of Morrison, Virginia, to take care of his ailing grandmother, Sadie. Michael knows very little of his family's history, and Sadie has a story she needs to tell him very urgently, for she

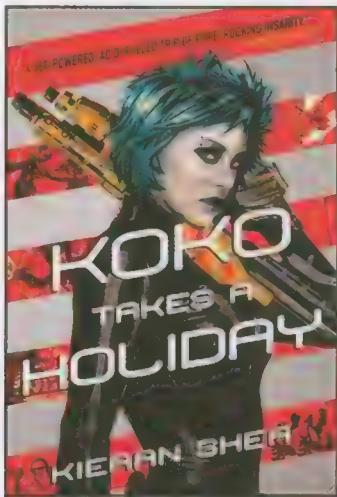
knows she is dying, and it is vital that she passes on her story. Sadie also has certain powers – the ability to experience what people feeling, and the ability to pass these feelings to others through her storytelling – as a result of which Michael doesn't so much hear the story as experience it in terrifying detail, something he finds very difficult to cope with. The story is long, and its telling slow, because of its emotional intensity for both Sadie and Michael.

And this is where I begin to have problems with the narrative. In part the story concerns an iron-bound crate, buried in a ditch somewhere out in the fields which are now swamped with kudzu, the rampant creeper which has become symbolic of the southern states of the USA. The reader quickly comes to see that it is associated with the presence of that mysterious crate whose presence so frightens everyone. However, the story's telling seems to me to be very slow, constantly deferring the things Michael really needs to know. Within the story, Sadie is determined that Michael should learn everything in precisely the right order, so that he understands fully what is to happen. The reader, though, might begin to feel that Tem is dragging it out just a little too much.

Sadie's story is that of a hard-scrabble life in a remote part of Virginia. Most of the local inhabitants are related to one another to some degree or another; the Gibson family's various strands seem to intertwine as tightly as the kudzu vines. The Gibsons are Melungeons, descendants of poor whites, escaped slaves and Native Americans who have intermarried over the centuries. Their ancestry is uncertain, they are often looked down on by the white inhabitants, and not unnaturally they tend to keep themselves to themselves. This much is histori-

cally true, even down to Gibson being a genuine Melungeon name, but Tem's purpose in raising the matter seems unclear. It may be that he is suggesting that Sadie's powers are a result of her being a Melungeon or else he is employing the stereotype of the small, remote community, with a completely different perception of what is socially acceptable, prey to unusual beliefs. The fact that Sadie's uncle is a snake-handling fire-and-brimstone preacher of the old school, possessed of a deeply warped personal theology, really doesn't help. Indeed, I don't think it is any coincidence that Sadie's cousin, Mickey-Gene, likes to read William Faulkner for there are strong overtones of both *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August* about *Blood Kin*. Sadie and Mickey-Gene have both recognised very early the need for deception in order to survive the Preacher's tyrannical rule unscathed but as children, their power to act against him is very limited.

What does save this novel from slipping into Faulkner-esque parody is the novel's contemporary strand. Here, Michael quietly comes to terms with the destiny that has been placed upon him by his family, caring for his grandmother reluctantly but with extraordinary tenderness. He is, perhaps, the classic fictional sacrifice, with addiction, alcoholism and a failed life behind him, but as he learns his family history there is a sense that Michael becomes grounded as a result of knowledge gained. It is not a family one can take much pride in but Michael can see the good in it as well as the bad and does what he can to atone for the past in his own low-key way. In many respects, the best parts of this novel are the most understated; the closer it moves towards the *grand guignol* the less persuasive it becomes.



KOKO TAKES A HOLIDAY

Kieran Shea

Titan pb, 336pp, £7.99

Jack Deighton

Koko Martstellar, a former mercenary for big corporations, is now running a brothel and bar on the artificially constructed pleasure archipelago the Sixty Islands, a complex under the auspices of the Custom Pleasure Bureau. When she kills two customers who have stepped out of line it triggers her former superior, Portia Delacompte, Vice President of the Bureau, who has undergone Selective Memory Treatment to allow her to attain membership of that organisation's board, to seek her arrest. Koko had assumed Delacompte's patronage would protect her but she now has to flee to the Second Free Zone, a collection of sky barges and arks in low Earth orbit. There follows a pretty standard tale of flight, pursuit by bounty hunters and indiscriminate mayhem.

Crucially, to this reader at any rate, Koko's predicament was not enough to justify her actions hence, from the outset, her outlook on life does not engage sympathy.

On the barge *Alaungpaya* in the Zone, Koko meets and

teams up with Jedidiah Flynn, an ex-cop, who has been forced to resign as he is suffering from a disease known as Depressus, whose victims, supposedly to avoid them disrupting daily life by random acts of suicide, are required to immolate themselves in a ritual known as Embrace. On *Alaungpaya*, they throw themselves off the ship to death. All other activities on the ship stop for the process.

An authorial interjection after the info-dump on Depressus gives a flavour of the overall narrative tone: "Ah Depressus. Quite the bitch but it sure does thin the herd." This is only one of many off-key notes scattered throughout the book beginning with the infantilised "boywhores" of Koko's brothel who – for no good reason, except perhaps authorial contempt – speak in pidgin.

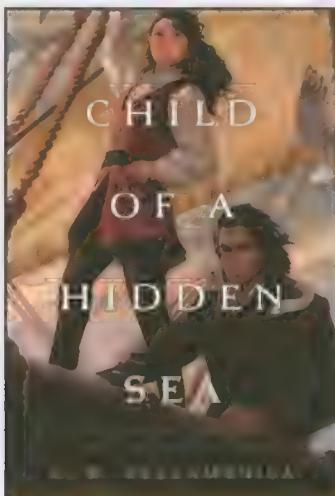
The story is set in the 2500s but Shea's imagined future doesn't really feel all that futuristic. It does though resemble what might be imagined as a gun-lover's ideal universe. Flynn reflects on "the added benefit of having a gun on you is people tend to give you a wide berth and show you some respect." (Of that contention only the wide berth bit might be true.) Delacompte has "nearly forgotten the sublime buoyancy of taking a human life – the confident rush of power," and in this unpleasant vision of a future shorn of anything akin to politeness or consideration for others, the mercenaries and the bounty hunters drawn from their former ranks take trophies from their victims in a particularly vile manner.

The story is mostly told in short chapters in the present tense. This ought to impart a sense of immediacy but in Shea's hands falls curiously flat. The one incident which is rendered in past tense is narrated in third person despite supposedly being told by Koko to

Flynn. Koko's expressed revulsion at the crime Delacompte committed is unbelievable here, being totally contrary to the attitudes she has shown up to the point that crime is revealed to the reader.

Most of the info-dumping, expressed through supposed newsfeed extracts or adverts for the Sixty Islands and elsewhere, is crudely executed. Lazy or unconvincing passages abound. "Luckily for Koko, the building's architectural design included great bulging bars on each terrace, presenting her with easy leaps between floors." "Frantically, Delacompte windmills her arms in an effort to forward the last of her momentum. It seems almost to the very last second that she has completely miscalculated her impromptu gymnastics and she'll now plummet backwards to an ungracious and stupid death. However, her balance steadies and her weight shifts forward. Her hands reach out and grab hold of a coarse edge of sectioned seam in front of her eyes. Delacompte lets out a titter of relief." (The discerning reader might just titter.) Not one, but two chapters begin, redundantly, with "Meanwhile". And Flynn's Depressus evaporates rather easily.

Quite what is the purpose of this story is obscure. It fails to illustrate human nature, beyond revelling in that of the conscienceless, murderous psychopath, and seems designed to bolster the thesis that the only means to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. But our putative heroine Koko is not one of the good guys; violence is her first resort, not her last. If it is meant as entertainment Koko ought to have a more cogent reason for her actions than merely that she has the means to achieve them. Nor can it be taken as satire. Shea's tone is too approving for that. This whole farrago reads as nothing but an extended piece of weapons porn.



CHILD OF A HIDDEN SEA

A.M. Dellamonica

Tor hb, 336pp, £17.99

Stephen Theaker

Sophie Hansa wants to know why her birth parents put her up for adoption as a baby, twenty-four years ago. She wants to establish a relationship with them. She has a lovely home life, and she adores her adoptive parents and her super smart brother Bram, and maybe it wouldn't seem so urgent right now if she wasn't trying to avoid defending her PhD thesis, but she's got her heart set on it and that's going to get her, and everyone else, into a lot of trouble.

Stormwrack is a watery planet, even in comparison to our own. The common language is Fleetspeak, spoken by the seagoing folk of two hundred and fifty island nations who gather together in the great Fleet. Things have been quite peaceful for the last century, thanks in part to *Temperance*, a ship so powerfully magical that its captain can sink any other ship simply by saying its name. You can see how that might bother people with plans of world domination.

These worlds collide after Sophie traces her birth mother

Beatrice Vanko to San Francisco. The reunion goes badly. Beatrice wants nothing to do with her and is horrified by the mention of her father. Sophie doesn't give up. Maybe her spider-sense is tingling, maybe she's just avoiding that viva, but she stakes out her mother's house for three days, sleeping in her car, and she's there when her Aunt Gale gets stabbed by two men.

Leaping to assist, Sophie is dragged in a whirlwind to Stormwrack. That's where her mum was born – as she'll soon find out – but her first priority is keeping her aunt alive while swimming a mile to the nearest fishing grounds. And her second priority is to start studying the animals in this odd new world. Giant moths migrating over the ocean and seagoing bats (one of which sits on her head while chomping on a moth) are just the beginning of the treasures Stormwrack offers the curious biologist.

Through accident and inheritance Sophie has to investigate the attack on her aunt, who was a Fleet Courier.

Well, she doesn't have to, exactly. In fact, everyone would rather prefer it if she returned to Erstwhile (as they call our planet/time/dimension) and leave her half-sister to claim the mantle of Fleet Courier and get on with the investigation. Yes, she has a sister, and she has as little time for Sophie as their mother. Sophie sympathises, but staying home would mean giving up the chance to see Stormwrack.

Sophie is a likeable character on whom to hang a novel. She's endlessly curious, physically brave, capable and clever. She can climb mountain cliffs, scuba dive, and work her way through a legal argument. She's the polar opposite of all those fantasy whiners who ever found their

way to a magical land and didn't stop moaning till they got back to their mundane lives. She embraces the opportunity, can't wait to see what's out there, and she's always thinking.

When she does get sent home to San Francisco, she tells Bram all about it. He's not totally convinced by her blurry photo of a sailboat, but she doesn't get into a huff about it – she understands that it's just a matter of evidence.

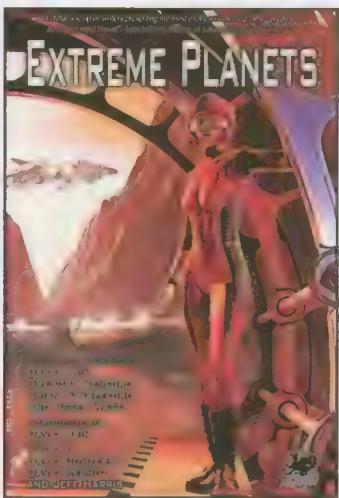
So she prepares to return. She maxes out her credit cards to buy a video camera, a top of the range phone, a solar-powered charger, and diving equipment. Later on, she finds a way to smuggle her phone back to Earth – to sync her data!

You can't blame her for wanting to take lots of photos, because Stormwrack is a cool place to visit, even if she does have to deal with some nasty villains. They are using weapons from Erstwhile, which gives her a slight edge – unlike her new friends, she knows grenades are dangerous.

But the bad guys are also using magic, and she has a lot to learn about that. Names are the thing when it comes to magic in Stormwrack, and like many a middle school child she has made the mistake of revealing her middle name.

Of course the attack on Aunt Gale was part of a deeper plot, and as Sophia dives to the bottom of that she kicks up trouble for her own family. There's a reason she was given up for adoption, and it wasn't that mum and dad couldn't afford to keep her.

But despite the marital problems, the monsters and the mayhem, this is, on the whole, a jolly book about a root-worthy protagonist, with a good-looking supporting cast and a balmy setting that gives it a holiday feel. Just the thing for reading during a rainy British summer!



EXTREME PLANETS
edited by David Conyers,
David Kernot & Jeff Harris
Chaosium Inc ebook, 356pp, \$18.95

Ian Sales

The second decade of the twenty-first century has seen an increasing blurring of genre boundaries – to such an extent, perhaps, that pure science fiction short stories are no longer as popular as they once were. This is no more than literary evolution in action, but it does mean that science fictions which reject this trend will look more and more dated. Which is not to say it is impossible to put a modern spin on pure science fiction, but writers harken back to those old patterns at their peril. They cannot turn back the tide. And reading *Extreme Planets* a reader can't help thinking this is no bad thing.

The anthology opens with an excerpt from *The Heart of the Comet* by David Brin and Gregory Benford, a 1986 novel. A more cynical reader might think it was included in order to get two marquee names on the cover. It's a vignette from a longer work and reads like one. Yet, among the original stories that follow, it does not feel all that out of place.

Despite being nearly thirty years old, it fits in well. For a current anthology, that's a somewhat embarrassing state of affairs. True, Stephen Gaskell's story, which immediately follows the Brin and Benford, is a more modern tale – but even that feels like it's riffing on Bruce Sterling's Mechanist stories from the early 1980s.

Some of the contents are “puzzle stories”, a form of short fiction which has somehow become emblematic of hard SF, though examples of it can usually only be found within the pages of *Analog*. In these, the protagonists find themselves in a difficult and potentially fatal situation, and must use their scientific and/or technological ingenuity to escape. G. David Nordley, an *Analog* veteran, has his protagonists marooned by mutineers on a dwarf planet beyond the orbit of Neptune, and they must use what limited resources they have to return to civilisation. Peter Watts' protagonists, on the other hand, are journeying to the end of time aboard an asteroid starship, and must figure out how to survive an unplanned trip through a red giant's chromosphere. And Patty Jansen's prisoner in a work-farm on Io must find a way to send a message to the outside world in order to protest his innocence, by making use of the very facilities he is forced to work upon.

Other stories follow other patterns, but not always successfully. The two murder-mysteries feel like they were written in the 1950s: Jay Caselberg's requires the investigators to visit a university to find out what the word “sheep” means; and Robert J. Mendenhall's has humanity in a Cold War with a mysterious alien threat and features two female characters who are defined by their relationship to the protagonist.

Slightly more modern takes include a story by Kevin Ikenberry which references Arthur C.

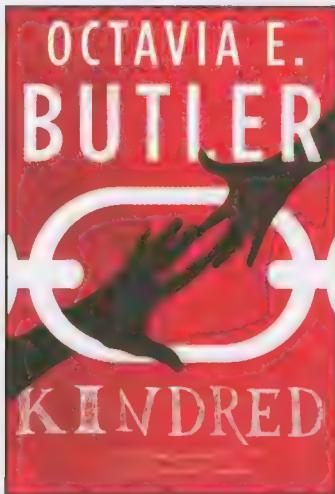
Clarke's ‘Maelstrom II’ but takes its title literally, as a man dives Baumgartner-like from orbit into the eye of an exoplanet superstorm. Meryl Ferguson's tale of sabotage at a research station on a waterworld makes a better fist of its science than it does its politics, even if the latter does drive the plot.

Two of the editors include a collaborative story of their own – a practice dubious at best – which is deeply marred by a female protagonist who is repeatedly characterised as stupid and patronised by the male characters. Another story with two authors, David N. Smith and Violet Addison, reads like a slightly-updated version of a 1970s tale, in which a scientist has her mind implanted in the body of a flying alien creature.

There are aliens in Jeff Hecht's contribution too, living deep in a world-ocean beneath hundreds of kilometres of ice...who stumble across contact from a human spaceprobe. Geoff Nelder's story describes a crash-landing on a world with an unusually viscous ocean, but the title explains the solution to the protagonists' predicament – although they fail to work it out for themselves. Guy Immega's lengthy story is one-half Robinsonade and one-half info-dump/history lesson, and feels far longer than it is.

The anthology ends with another marquee name, Brian Stableford, although he at least provides an original story. It's a polished piece, and characteristically dry in tone. Having said that, it doesn't seem to actually feature an “extreme planet”...

The contents are reasonably faithful to the theme, but that shouldn't produce a collection which reads like it could have published twenty to fifty years ago. Pure science fiction is not dead yet, but it's going to take better than this to keep it alive in the twenty-first century.



KINDRED

Octavia Butler

Headline pb, 304pp, £8.99

Paul Graham Raven

Kindred, the most successful (and least overtly science fictional) novel by the late Octavia Butler, has a simple plot. In 1976, Dana, a black woman and writer, moves into her new Los Angeles home with her white husband. Before they settle in, however, Dana is transported through time and space to a Maryland riverbank in 1815, where she rescues a young boy from drowning. The boy, Rufus, is the son of a minor plantation owner who turns out to be one of Dana's distant ancestors, and her fate is entangled with his; whenever Rufus's life is in danger, she is pulled from her "home" time and into his milieu, where she ends up saving him – usually from himself.

Rufus's milieu is that of antebellum slavery in the southern states, and through Dana's repeated timeslips we are shown not only the more immediate cruelties of slavery but also its more subtle mechanics, the chains and hobbles of tradition, thought and language which, embedded in the deep structures

of the social, are even harder to escape than physical bonds. Dana's experience of another world – a better but by no means perfect world – opens up the antebellum context for a modern reader in a way that, perhaps, the more traditional slave narrative form might not; in sharing Dana's sense of dislocation, the reader is obliged to see the past anew, just as Dana is forced to face the ugly realities beneath the whitewashing of history.

I will not attempt a critique of *Kindred*. For one thing, the world has no need of the thoughts of a middle-class English white man on what is deservedly a canonical novel of both the antebellum slavery and feminist canons. But the question of *Kindred*'s genre is perhaps worth another look. Everyone's favourite online encyclopedia cites various scholars arguing for *Kindred*'s status as a (neo-)slave narrative, an initiation novel, an anthropological historical fiction, a science fiction, and a "grim fantasy", as Butler herself labelled it in an interview. While I'm sure these arguments were all made in the spirit of seeking useful and illuminating readings of the text, one can't help but be reminded of more recent (and fervid) discussions around genre and canonicity, and the factional divide between those who would constrain "science fiction" – whatever that might be – and those who would open it up.

Kindred's use of the time-slip plot device provides a strong argument for it belonging to the domain of *speculative* fiction (or *fantastika*, if you'd rather not borrow terms from Uncle Bob) – but *science fiction*? There's no technology involved, no chin-stroke wrestling with the Grandfather Paradox; never once do we discover *how* Dana timeslips, let alone *why* it is that she

can take objects or other people along with her; Dana's ability to time-slip simply *is*. To question the *how* is to miss the point... but questioning the *how* is one of those things that science fiction does, according to some definitions. So *Kindred* *can't* be science fiction... but what could be more science fictional than time travel? So maybe it's a fantasy... but there's no secondary world, no irruption of the uncanny.

The point is that *Kindred* – like most fiction of quality – bears multiple readings, even conflictual readings. It is the grim fantasy that Butler said it was; it is also a slave narrative, an initiation novel, a work of science fiction, a historical critique of American attitudes to slavery. It is all of them, and more.

There are two ways to define a genre: as a binary (ie you're either in or out) or as a tendency (ie a given text may partake in the tropes or techniques of a given genre to some greater or lesser degree); if this reminds you of gender studies rhetoric, then consider that *genre* and *gender* share their etymological root, as well as their determinist legacy. This tension, I think, is at the root of science fiction's civil war *du jour*: the question as to whether it should be a public space, or the private fiefdom of those who nurtured it through the years of drought and plenty. Should it include, or exclude?

Butler never shied from including herself in the genre; it is assumed that my own allegiance to inclusion is clear. And regardless of which genre you might choose to situate it in, I feel safe in suggesting that Butler herself would have wanted us to take away from *Kindred* at least one hard-won wisdom: that the first casualty of exclusion is empathy, which is the best and highest of what it is to be human.



THE VERY BEST OF TAD WILLIAMS

Tad Williams

Tachyon pb, 432pp, £13.50

Ian Hunter

Tad Williams might be better known as the author of the meaty fantasy novels that comprise the Memory, Sorrow and Thorn quartet or the Shadowmarch series, the quintet that makes up the Otherland books, or even standalone fare like *Tailchaser's Song* which is finally being made into an animated movie. More recently, he has given us some celestial noir with the Bobby Dollar books, but here we have shorter offerings – sixteen stories and a hundred-and-twenty page screenplay called *Sunshine*. Only one story – 'Omnitron, What Ho!' – is original to this collection with the others first appearing in anthologies edited by the likes of Chris Golden, Jack Dann, Gardener Dozois, Peter S. Beagle, George R.R. Martin, and even David Copperfield.

The very first tale gets us into a light-hearted groove as 'The Old Scale Game' tells the story of a knight and dragon who are getting a bit old in the tooth and fang and come up with a scheme

that benefits them both, much to the envy of other mythical creatures who are being hunted to extinction. Similar scaly shenanigans are evident in 'A Stark and Wormy Knight' where an exasperated dragon mum has to recount the bedtime story of how Grand-Greatpap (there is some wonderfully intentional misuse of language throughout this story) managed to overcome the dogged Sir Libogan the Undeflectable. In 'Omnitron, What Ho!', society waster Werner Von Booster Secondstage recounts how he first met his faithful robot servant in a story that is a cross between P.G. Woodhouse and Oscar Wilde. A lighter tone also pervades the story of a down-on-his-luck magician in 'The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of' which starts with a familiar hardboiled introduction but in this case our hero is admiring his new client from the vantage point of the carpet where he is lying in a drunken stupor.

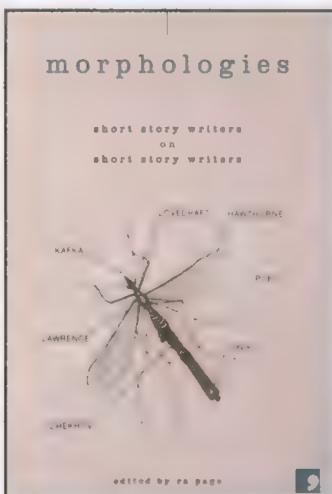
The good humour isn't maintained in all of the stories though. In 'Not With A Whimper, Either' online chat room banter turns into something more sinister that just might spell the end of the world, and in 'The Stranger's Hands' two foreigners are discovered in the forest – one of them has the power to make dreams come true, but possibly not exactly in a way the wisher intended, and such power inevitably attracts the attention of the greatest wizards in the land.

On the darker side of the tracks are the 'Black Sunshine' screenplay and the stories 'The Storm Door', 'Z is for', and 'And Ministers of Grace'. In 'Black Sunshine' events take place in the past and the present when Eric returns home and remembers the night everything changed for him and his friends after one of them had managed to get

hold of an experimental drug called Black Sunshine. We are in Stephen King territory here with the dual timescale and the close-knit group, but surely that can't be a bad thing? What is bad are the events that unfold in 'The Storm Door'; it reads like an old pulp hero tale smashing right up against a very modern horror trope given a very original spin. And in 'Z is for', Harold wakes up at a party trying to piece together who he is and what he is doing there, and why can't he get the idea of zebras out of his head? Clearly some of his fellow partygoers don't like all this zebra talk. Back in the day, this would have been a cracking *Twilight Zone* episode. 'And Ministers of Grace' is totally different from everything else in the collection, being the gritty SF tale of one Lamentation Kane – a Guardian of Covenant, a Soldier of God, and often an Angel of Death in his role as a holy assassin – who is sent undercover to the planet of Archimedes to kill their prime minister. Again, this is a story just crying out to be made into a film.

Apart from the sublime 'Child of An Ancient City', where a group of lost travellers must entertain a vampyr with their stories each night to survive, top honours have to go to 'Every Fuzzy Beast of the Earth, Every Pink Fowl of the Air' where God is having a day off, leaving angels Gabriel and Metatron to add the finishing touches to the Creation until God's daughter, Sophia, turns up and starts making her own changes. It's been my painful experience that in matters of interior design it's best to leave things to the ladies – as our two angels soon find out in a highly inventive, hilarious tale.

Throughout this collection Williams ably demonstrates that he is a jack of all trades – and their master as well. Damn him.



MORPHOLOGIES: SHORT STORY WRITERS ON SHORT STORY WRITERS
edited by Ra Page
Comma Press pb, 204pp, £9.99

Andrew J. Wilson

Manchester's Comma Press is dedicated to promoting the short story form, and having published a raft of collections and anthologies, it has now added this compilation of critical essays to its list. Publisher Ra Page commissioned fifteen contemporary writers to discuss fifteen past masters. The idea was to assemble these structural interpretations in order to celebrate the diversity and idiosyncrasy that the form encourages.

In his playful introduction, Page dismisses the idea that *Morphologies* is an attempt to define a Platonic ideal: "The wonder of the short story – not to mention its unique political power – lies in its pluralism, its sheer variety and flexibility as a form." He goes on to propose three distinct types of story, and discusses the use of misdirection, revelation, imagery and ritual. Page is refreshingly self-deprecating about his theorising, but it seems sound to me. In particular, his critical

superstructure supports close readings of both mainstream and speculative fiction.

It's fascinating that half of the authors under discussion wrote what can be argued to be SF, a slightly higher proportion than that represented in the writers discussing them, in fact. On the other hand, Katherine Mansfield is the only woman to have an essay devoted to her, and less than a third of the contributors are women. I'm not sure what to make of this, but if *Morphologies* is rather more male-dominated than the contemporary literary landscape, it seems to me that this must be by accident rather than design.

The book is chronological, so we begin with Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. Sara Maitland argues convincingly that Hawthorne's stories represent magical realism *avant la lettre*. Poe was very much influenced by Hawthorne, of course. In fact, his well-known, though often misquoted, definition of the purpose of a short story as the achievement of "a certain unique or single effect" is taken from a review of *Twice-Told Tales*.

Three of the other authors dealt with in *Morphologies* – Arthur Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells and H.P. Lovecraft – all readily acknowledged that Poe's tales had inspired their own work. However, it could well be argued that his literary criticism influenced many of the other writers in the book, even if only at second hand. Sean O'Brien proposes that Poe "sought to demonstrate the inescapable rightness of his own practice" by advocating concision, compression and unity of effect. Nevertheless, Poe's theories about short story structure undoubtedly cast long shadows.

Morphologies underlines the fact that distinctions between the realistic and the fantastic

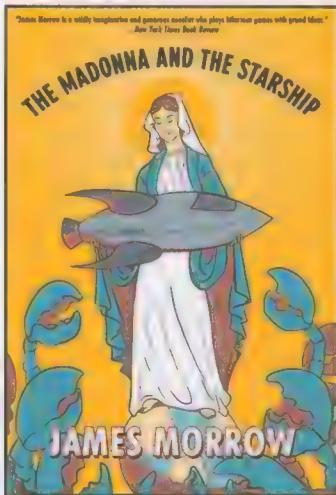
break down into incoherence in discussions of the short story. *Interzone* readers will be interested to discover that Brian Aldiss has chosen to write about Thomas Hardy. Adam Roberts tackles Rudyard Kipling, but not his overtly speculative work. Toby Litt amusingly describes his rather dysfunctional relationship with Franz Kafka. Ramsey Campbell's contribution is a thoughtful essay on H.P. Lovecraft.

Notable contributions from the mainstream camp include a moving personal essay on Anton Chekov by Frank Cotterell Boyce. Ali Smith's contribution focuses on the first three stories in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, and shows that, while not inclined to twist endings, he favoured sudden mid-story changes of direction.

At the beginning of this review, I raised the question of whether short fiction should deal with an internal or external experience. If nothing else, *Morphologies* suggest that it is perfectly possible to do both. Similarly, the false dichotomy of the realistic versus the fantastic is well past its sell-by date.

Katharine Mansfield is often held up as one of the defining figures of the mainstream moment-of-psychological truth story. However, Alison MacLeod argues that: "There is a quietly visionary sense at work in Mansfield's mature work, a sense that reality [...] is 'porous' (a favourite adjective for Mansfield in 'At the Bay'). Division is an illusion."

I would highly recommend this excellent book to anyone interested in how classic short fiction works. All of the contributors to *Morphologies* have their own unique angles on the craft, but each is constructive and informative. The truth is, all first-rate stories are unique; and that is what makes them great.



THE MADONNA AND THE STARSHIP

James Morrow

Tachyon pb, 192pp, \$14.95

Duncan Lunan

One respect in which SF differs from reality is that most stories take place in a world which has no science fiction, so the characters are unprepared for whatever they find to be happening. The exceptions tend to involve media sci-fi rather than written SF: in Mark Clifton's *When They Come from Space*, ETs who've been watching our television broadcasts turn up in the form they expect us to expect. In *Galaxy Quest*, the cast of a long-running and strangely familiar TV series are abducted by aliens who think it's all true. In Arthur C. Clarke's story 'Armaments Race', one of the *Tales from the White Hart*, the special effects team of a US TV series have to produce a succession of ever-more-impressive death rays until they come up with a disintegrator which actually works. It's probably no coincidence that most of *The Madonna and the Starship* takes place on the New York set of a very similar series in 1953. Dylan Thomas dies offstage halfway through the book, rather disap-

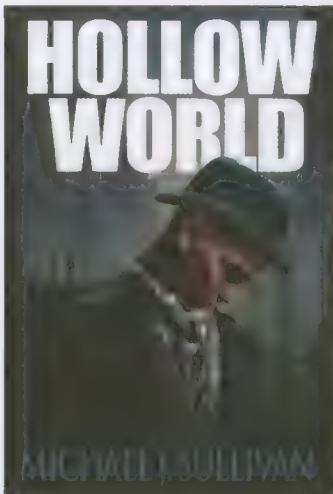
pointingly since the characters know him and keep quoting him – in one scene going all round the line from *And Death Shall Have No Dominion* which James Blish used as a title just at that time.

The series may be imaginary but the sponsors are real: "BROCK BARTON AND HIS ROCKET RANGERS! Brought to you by Kellogg's Sugar Corn Pops, with the sweetenin' already on it, and Ovaltine, the hot chocolaty breakfast drink schoolteachers recommend!" In Britain at that time few homes had television but we did have *Dick Barton* on radio and *Dan Dare* on Radio Luxembourg, sponsored by Horlicks, and its deservedly forgotten rival sponsored by Ovaltine, which featured a flying saucer crewed by very Young Adults and armed with a nuclear weapon – used to trigger a volcanic eruption, much like the one on page seventeen of this book. James Morrow is only two years younger than myself. In the acknowledgements he claims that the inspiration for this book came from research rather than childhood memories, but I wonder.

"Even the grottiest pulp SF performs a salutary cultural function," writes Morrow in his afterword. His characters do take their young audience seriously, to the extent that each episode is followed by a short science lesson from 'Uncle Wonder', urging their child star and their viewers to try experiments at home, always ending with the mantra 'Safety first!' In consequence they are visited by a delegation of Qualimosians – "by-God extraterrestrials, complete with crustacean physiognomy, insectile eyes and an antisocial agenda." They've come to present the show with an award for its values, but also to wipe out irrationality wherever they find it, especially in religious belief. Unfortunately *Brock Barton* shares studio facilities with a Sunday

morning religious show called *Not By Bread Alone*, and the only way to save the world is to subvert it and present a 'special' portraying the Christian story as a hoax.

In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, John Clute's entry on Morrow concludes, "JM's work has been likened to that of Kurt Vonnegut, and similarities are indeed very evident. But while Vonnegut never disbelieves in the medium of his art, JM has great difficulty giving credence to the artifices of fiction. This may be the price paid for passion and clarity of mind; and it may be a price worth paying." The metafiction of *The Madonna and the Starship* might have been written in answer to that. Its central character is Kurt Jastrow, sharing his first name with you-know-who but his last name with a distinguished astronomer and science writer, the author of *Red Giants and White Dwarfs* ("a masterpiece of science" according to Wernher von Braun), *Until the Sun Dies* and *The Enchanted Loom*. Paddy Chayefsky called him "the greatest writer on science alive today" and Sir Bernard Lovell said of him "Very few scientists are capable of writing as fearlessly and honestly as Dr Jastrow". Calling the character 'Sagan' would have been too obvious...but to whatever extent the Qualimosians represent the spirit of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, the 'live and let live' moral of *The Madonna and the Starship* is closer to Sagan's *The Demon-Haunted World*. And what's more, it's funny! My one regret is that we don't see more of the child star, Andy Tuckerman, who gets only one good line but whose similarity to 'Zuckerman', the passionate opponent of nuclear proliferation, suggests Andy might have been intended for a bigger role. But if his part in the story had to be abridged for publication, maybe that, too, was a price worth paying.



HOLLOW WORLD

Michael J. Sullivan

Tachyon pb, 384pp, \$15.95

Simon Marshall-Jones

If you'd just been diagnosed with a terminal illness, what would you choose to do in your remaining time? Go on a round-the-world cruise? Climb Mount Everest? Or maybe do what Ellis Rogers does: build a time machine and project himself into the future.

Rogers is an MIT-educated scientist, and the story opens with his being diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis and given just six-to-twelve months to live. He's trapped in a loveless marriage, but his wife Peggy still cares for him despite blaming him for the suicide of their son, and he spends most of his spare time either tinkering on his machine in the garage, or drinking with his buddy Warren, his intellectual, spiritual, and physical opposite. However, the terminal diagnosis has given him the impetus he needed to go ahead and try the machine out. Much to his surprise, the device works, and he zooms forward to what he thinks is two hundred years in the future.

He arrives in a forest on a seemingly abandoned world, with

no signs of humanity apparent. Following the course of a river, he soon finds a familiar landmark, the Ford Museum, but still he finds no indications that anyone's around – that is, until he hears the sound of someone being murdered. This is the turning point – the start of a new adventure.

The time travel device in *Hollow World* is secondary to the main thrust of the novel, merely serving as a literary hook upon which to hang the strands of the narrative. The future in which Rogers is pitched is not the two hundred years he calculated, but two millennia. Not only has the physical world changed, its inhabitants having moved underground, but homo sapiens itself has metamorphosed into a race of identical-looking, genderless, hairless mannequins who display none of the negative traits of humanity apparent in Rogers' time. There's no violence, everyone lives according to their own whims, sex and biological reproduction have been replaced by artificial means, no one dies, and no one gets ill. Society has changed immensely, its stratification turned upside-down, a place where artists and geomancers (what we would call meteorologists) being highly venerated.

Sullivan has, at least superficially, woven a sparky science-fiction yarn, but that would be too shallow a reading; there's a lot more going on here than that. It explores the nature of love, one's relationship to oneself and to others, to one's environment and how it shapes human beings (both as individuals and collectively), as well as looking at how the Other is perceived. Rogers, known as a Darwin (as he was born through natural means), is a stranger in Hollow World, not just culturally but also physically, in essence being the alien. But it is Pax,

the shy, sensitive bowler-hatted arbitrator, who not only shows him how to accept his new world, but also himself.

The other theme which pops up is one's definition of paradise. Warren, his old drinking buddy, turns up, now the leader of a tiny community living on the planet's surface who have embraced 'the old ways'. Warren's transference to the future also changed him, but in a more fundamental, less transcendent way. A fanatical God-fearing 'Old West' frontiersman, he wishes to institute the New United States of America, believing it his divinely-ordained mission. However, his definition of paradise amounts to nothing more than a reversion to the aggressive and competitive humanity of two millennia earlier, achieved by reintroducing genders, and simultaneously providing what amounts to a final solution with regards to all those who live below ground. Stopping him is Rogers' own mission.

Sullivan writes fluidly, his vivid descriptions and characterisations being especially sharp. He paints the world in bright lights and shiny colours, while Ellis Rogers is drawn as being out of joint with the new world (having been similarly burdened in his own time) as well as a man heavily infected by guilt. Pax is entirely engaging, a wide-eyed innocent, albeit possessing some very special qualities. Warren is the antithesis of everything Rogers believes: Ellis is also Christian, but cleaving to the New Testament in contrast to his friend's fire and brimstone Old Testament approach. In the latter part of the book, it is the dynamics between these two which drives the story along at its helter-skelter pace.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable and engaging story with a satisfying philosophical edge elevating it entirely. Recommended.



THE QUEEN OF THE TEARLING
Erika Johansen

Bantam hb, 433pp, £12.99

Jim Steel

Johansen's reported seven-figure advance is an impressive calling card for someone who is so new to publishing that, at the time of writing, she doesn't even have her own Wikipedia entry. However, Google informs us that "Some results may have been removed under data protection law in Europe". Intriguing. Are there skeletons? Of course, there might well be other Erika Johansens out there. So much for the basic research.

What we do know is that her trilogy is already being made into a major Hollywood franchise starring Emma Watson. We could well be looking at the next *Hunger Games/Twilight* series. All this has the effect of almost reducing books themselves to the state of spin-off products before they even hit the shelves. The films will no doubt keep the bones of the plot, but the flesh will be rendered anew. People will come to picture Watson and the multi-million-dollar production when they read the trilogy. This might be no bad

thing. The first novel, *The Queen of the Tearling*, is seriously lacking in quality at the start, although it soon grows into itself. And, at the very least, readers of the future will come to the books knowing whether Tear is pronounced "rip" or "drop", thus avoiding any sense of dislocation.

So we begin. Nineteen-year-old Princess Kelsea Raleigh (can we have a princess called Kelsea? Like, totally!) is in safe hiding in the Reddick Forest when she is summoned to the throne of the Regent upon reaching her majority. (Through no fault of the author, Reddick is first mentioned in one of the most unlucky line-break splits it has ever been my misfortune to encounter.) It soon becomes apparent that the Regent has no intention of giving up power and Kelsea is rapidly involved in a kidnapping/rescue adventure on the way.

This is no run-of-the-mill secondary world, something which goes a little way to mitigating the lack of any serious attempt at feudal nomenclature or characterisation. There are places named New London and New Europe, and it is swiftly revealed that this world was long ago discovered and colonised by the British and the Americans. Contact has, of course, been lost. It's a land where people are equally happy to talk of magic and antihistamines. Medicine, or the lack thereof, is a big thing in this world, since the ship containing the medical staff sank. So far, so fuzzy. The Tearling portion of this New World was founded by William Tear, a William Penn utopian, although in recent years the Tearling has had to send an annual human tribute to the rival kingdom of Mortmesne which is ruled by the Red Queen and is very much in the ascendant. The pre-Crossing land of America, already many centuries in the past,

is a place of myth. The obvious analogies with the European settlement of North America are there, of course. There is also a disturbing hint that this is a whites-only world for reasons that are not yet revealed, and Christianity, although banned by Penn, has re-established itself, although Kelsea herself is ambivalent about it at this stage. If some, or all, of these themes are developed in the remainder of the trilogy then we might have an impressive work on our hands, regardless of how chunky the dialogue sometimes is. In its defence, Kelsea's library cheekily contains copies of Tolkien, a writer famously cloth-eared when it came to reported speech.

Kelsea is refreshingly plain for a princess, although that won't survive Hollywoodisation – phrases such as 'far too plain for my tastes' will bounce off when flung at Watson. She is also surrounded by strong male characters, which had the potential to undermine any empowerment. There is the mysterious masked folk hero known as the Fetch – responsible for the earlier kidnapping – and Lazarus, nicknamed the Mace, who is a fierce and loyal, if taciturn, warrior. Not the deepest of characters, but both could have drowned her out on the page if used carelessly. However, she is very much her own person. She is naive, naturally, to begin with, but she is someone possessed of great inner strength. The early graphic violence that surrounded her in the countryside progresses into scenes of urban intrigue as she starts to establish her own grip on power. And plenty of other female characters from all classes step up to the mark. This is not a book that betrays its own potential.

Plot-wise, this volume resolves itself satisfactorily while setting up the next instalment. Judgement is conditionally suspended.

FUTURE INTERRUPTED

by Jonathan McCalmont

8.

Rest in Peace, Uncle Bob

I remember Robert A. Heinlein being dead, which is not the same thing as remembering when he died. Back in the 1990s when I was first getting into science fiction, Heinlein was almost out of print in the UK. Contemporaries such as Asimov and Clarke still enjoyed vigorous sales and a reassuring amount of shelf space but Heinlein himself was disappearing beneath the historical waves with only the spires of *Starship Troopers* still visible. In fact, Heinlein's legacy was far more obvious in the works that reacted against his style and values, from the stripped-back futurism of cyberpunk to the progressive politics of the so-called Radical Hard SF. I remember Uncle Bob being dead but something seems to have disturbed his well-earned rest.

After decades of being an American phenomenon, Heinlein's works are back on the shelves of Britain's remaining bookshops. Gollancz's prestigious Masterwork series has expanded to include *Double Star* and *The Door into Summer* alongside its existing editions of *Starship Troopers* and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Meanwhile, non-fiction presses have been doing their part to stimulate academic interest with the publication of not only

a two-volume hagiography by William J. Patterson but also a series of critical volumes that acknowledge the problematic aspects of Heinlein's patriarchal individualism and sex-positive incest advocacy but try to present them as evidence of a complex and progressive sensibility. Even the storm-tossed seas of online fandom are helping to wash Heinlein back into the limelight as certain corners of American genre culture have taken to using his position and popularity as indicators of the moral and aesthetic health of science fiction as a whole. What is going on here? Why are we seeing a concerted effort to repair the reputation and standing of a man who died over twenty-five years ago? There are a number of answers and most of them are partially true.

One explanation is that Heinlein's back catalogue represents a substantial financial interest for the copyright holders. Time, fashion and the collapse of the mid-list are unkind to long-dead authors and while Uncle Bob's books might well have leapt off the shelves in 1988, the current beneficiaries of Heinlein's estate must now work harder to keep his books in the public eye. Sometimes this work



might involve working with tame biographers, other times it will involve cutting deals that make little money for the estate but do at least keep Heinlein's books in print. Clareson and Sanders' book *The Heritage of Heinlein* includes anecdotes about Heinlein's widow trying to block re-publication of work that she deemed 'vulgar' but the concerted effort to get Heinlein back into print suggests that such prissiness has now been replaced by steel-eyed pragmatism and the realisation that the dead no longer look after themselves.

Another thing to bear in mind is that while Heinlein's reputation has been declining in the UK for decades, American genre culture still considers him to be a central figure in the history of science fiction. One of the more regrettable aspects of the online marketplace of ideas is that sharing a language with Americans and Australians means that it is proving difficult to maintain the distinctively British genre culture that once flowed from British magazines, conventions and publishers. Like every other product of neoliberalism and late-stage capitalism, the Internet provides a level playing field on which local concerns and sensibilities

are dismembered and devoured by their much larger and better-resourced competition. Don't get me wrong... American genre culture features an overabundance of great stories, books, writers and ideas but the price of gaining admission to that abundance includes having to pay attention to American issues, American histories and American ideas about what constitutes a canonical author.

Shifting realities of genre publishing aside, the campaign to restore Heinlein's reputation and standing may also have something to do with the fact that a particular generation of science fiction readers are now reaching the end of their natural lives. The growing concern about Heinlein's status and visibility are reminiscent of a similar concern regarding the status of the film producer and director Roger Corman.

One of the most intriguing books about American film that you are ever likely to read is Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. Drawing on extensive interviews and biographical research, Biskind describes how the post-war baby boomer generation came of age in the 1960s and set about changing the face of American film. The book's opening chapters are upbeat and filled with anecdotes about the likes of Warren Beatty, Francis Ford Coppola and Dennis Hopper taking on the system and convincing the studios to give them enough freedom to reach a new generation of filmgoers. However, while this strategy did deliver huge successes such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather*, it also allowed for ruinous failures like William Friedkin's *Sorcerer* and Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*. According to Biskind, New Hollywood engineered the golden age of 1970s Hollywood but their excesses

and individualism also paved the way for an backlash in which studios reasserted control and forced talent to cooperate with the blockbuster business model that endures to this day. The nuance of this historical account is entirely missing from a recent film made about the exact same time frame.

Alex Stapleton's documentary *Corman's World: Exploits of a Hollywood Rebel* features many of the same names as *Easy Riders*, *Raging Bulls* but rather than describing a period of boom and bust in which some directors were indulged at the cost of what turned out to be much less creative freedom for everyone else, Stapleton presents the '50s and '60s as the opening steps of a long triumphant march towards the era of the blockbuster that began with *Jaws* and *Star Wars*. The interesting thing about this film is that despite being an inexperienced director, Stapleton managed to secure interviews with a large chunk of Hollywood royalty who all turned out to praise the vision and independent spirit of the man who made terrible films like *Battle Beyond the Stars* and *Frankenstein Unbound*.

Much like Heinlein, Corman has become so closely associated with a particular moment in cultural history that it is almost impossible to pass judgement on the man's work without also seeming to pass judgement on that moment in cultural history. Sure... Corman is an important historical figure whose strategy of targeting younger audiences with genre material laid the foundations of contemporary Hollywood, but the real reason Hollywood royalty lined up to praise Roger Corman is that he represents a spirit of independence and experimentation that is entirely at odds with the reality of today's Hollywood machine. The re-invention of Corman as

the *Man Who Built Hollywood* suggests that Hollywood baby boomers are trying to write their own epitaph and ensure that their generation is remembered for its experimentation and individuality rather than its complete capitulation to the forces of big business.

J.G. Ballard's short work 'Why I Want To Fuck Ronald Reagan' makes the point that Ronald Reagan the person was an entirely different entity to Ronald Reagan the political figure and media construct. Similarly, the ideas and principles represented by the likes of Robert A. Heinlein and Roger Corman bear only a passing relation to the real people buried beneath the weight of those names. We fight over these names because of what they represent. We fight over these names because we want recognition for our values and concerns.

Some right-wing American fans want Heinlein to remain visible because they think that science fiction should continue to embody a blend of iconoclasm, rugged individualism and patriarchal power worship that is common to both Heinlein's writing and the contemporary American right. Some progressive fans accept that Heinlein had a huge impact upon the development of science fiction but want to re-invent him as a progressive or even quasi-feminist figure because re-inventing Heinlein to fit your values is a means of ensuring that your values will be as much a part of the history of science fiction as Heinlein himself. Despite sharing the desire to emphasise science fiction's history as a political literature, such revisionism strikes me as wrong-headed; why go to the trouble of papering over the cracks when we could instead re-plaster the ceiling? We do the future no favours by seeking to deceive the present about the past.

LASER FODDER

TONY LEE

IF....

GAGARIN: FIRST IN SPACE

HER

UNDER THE SKIN

THE NIGHT IS YOUNG

BOY MEETS GIRL

FRAU IM MOND

MIRAGE MEN

ESCAPE FROM PLANET EARTH

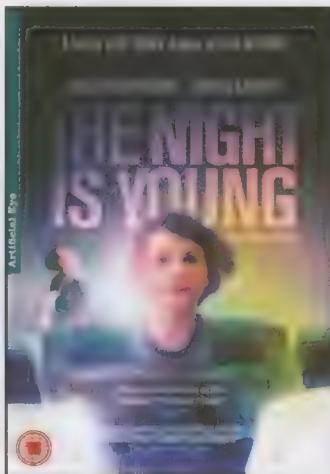
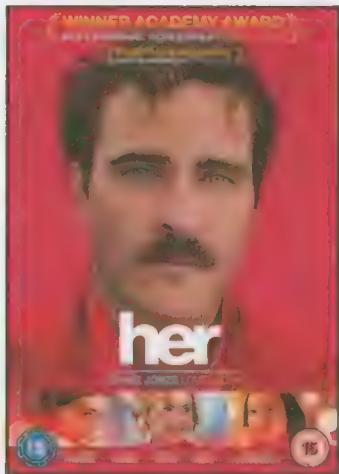
HUNTING THE LEGEND



The first movie in the 'Mick Travis' trilogy, Lindsay Anderson's *If....* (Blu-ray, 9 June), is a peculiar drama of youth revolution at a boarding school for boys. It stars Malcolm McDowell as everyman Mick, a rebel with significant cause for complaint, suffering a farcically disgraceful mistreatment of the sort that is best taken as a satirical criticism of the British establishment. Although it is whimsically juvenile and Pythonesque, the dramatic storyline of insurrection in *If....* (1968) benefits from a caustically allegorical subtext, as it depicts the cruelties of a regime dedicated to enforcing authority with all but negligible results, and it eagerly demonstrates that even modest degrees of elitism wielding power over ordinary people will, typically (but arguably always) produce a hierarchy that's irredeemably corrupt. "When do we live? That's what I wanna know."

This HD release looks splendid, and the package of extras includes three shorts by the director, extensive interviews with cast and crew, a commentary by critic David Robinson and busy McDowell himself, and there's also a 56-page booklet written by David Cairns which has some rare photos.

Increasingly surreal, yet still bitingly satirical, Anderson continued to chart his world's end views of cross-genre themes in the fractured narrative of musical comedy *O Lucky Man* (1973), and a socially-relevant dystopian-tyranny in *Britannia Hospital* (1982), both great examples of experimental cinema that are well worth seeing, from an era when this country was able to make pictures that actually meant something as artistic and political statements, not simply vapid concoctions (like *Chariots of Fire* – a movie bad enough to kill anyone's interest in the Olympics, if not competitive sport entirely) from a tamed-by-conservatism British film industry that is thoroughly bland enough for sundry export.



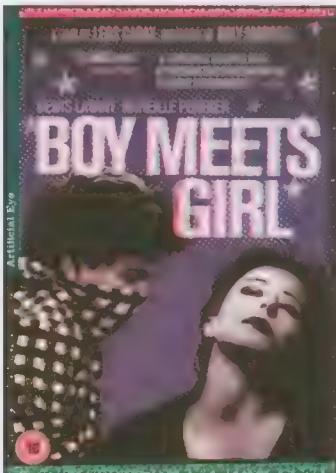
In zero gravity, "a man might lose the ability to act rationally...under the influence of 'cosmic horror'." Ever since Philip Kaufman's epic *The Right Stuff* (1983), astronaut-movie fans – like me – have been wondering about and waiting for a similarly themed effort depicting the Russian side of 'the race into space'. **GAGARIN: FIRST IN SPACE** (DVD, 23 June) is a rather uncomplicated biopic of the cosmonaut hero of the USSR. Production designer turned director Pavel Parkhomenko does a commendable job of presenting this historical drama as a journey into the unknown, with all of the anxiety and speculation that went on before such sky-breaking endeavours. Dramatisation of the pioneering Vostok launch on 12th April 1961 ends act one, and the majority of the movie is composed of various flashbacks – to arduous training, family scenes, rocketry science, and the politics of Soviet achievement – that fragment

Gagarin's orbital flight, but in no way diminish the impact of the storytelling.

Against mutterings of 'Stalinist prejudices' we see Gagarin chosen first over his rival Titov. The spectacular blast-off and space-age experience is detailed by excellent special effects. The candidates are caught out while listening to a Soviet SF radio play, and this quite wittily recalls the legendary Wells/Welles Mercury theatre's 'night that panicked America'. There are quietly poignant moments for Gagarin's parents and his wife. *Gagarin* doesn't match up to the Hollywood scale or the entertainment values of *The Right Stuff*, but it's an appealing mix of one part corny propaganda and two parts heroic adventure, with a wake-up-from-dreaming pinch of irony. Of course, this lacks the swaggering flashiness of its various US counterparts, but that's not a flaw because it's all heart. See it soon.

Mayonnaise and toothpaste are common examples of 'Bingham plastics'. They mimic solids or flow liquidly depending on the pressure applied. Some actors present similar properties. The Bingham-plastic actor is one that seems to require only the lightest of directorial guidance to form whatever three-dimensional character is required for any purpose. While some characterisations may taste like neither Hellmann's nor Colgate, extruded performances remain worthy, although their application in SF drama might be just as formula-smooth as paste. Whether portraying Roman royalty (*Gladiator*), a young Johnny Cash (*Walk the Line*), or reflecting upon the contortions of Shyamalan unrealities (*Signs*, *The Village*), Joaquin Phoenix is a remarkable talent, fully capable of expressing vulnerabilities and/or anxieties that are easily confused with weakness. His role as lonely Theo in Spike Jonze's *HER* (DVD/Blu-ray 23 June) is something of a tour de force of Bingham plasticity.

Picking up genre ideas scattered like confetti throughout Andrew Niccol's rom-com *Simone* (2002), this SF drama posits the next-generation of invisible friendship,



as computer intelligence Sam OS1 (voiced by Scarlett Johansson) revives poor Theo's melancholy life. However, unlike the ever helpful companion droid of *Robot & Frank*, the obviously metaphysical femininity of passionate Samantha plays a different game of throes with the human protagonist's emotions ("Oh, what a sad trick"). Theo seems an overly sensitive mess, usually too busy having 'conversations' to actually talk about anything, so that even the farcical episode of surrogate sex becomes 'a bit on the side' for him to feel guilty over being unfaithful to a bodiless Sam. Are there any workable – let alone advisable – shortcuts to intimacy?

With A.I. occasionally making news with Turing test-pass claims, and cyber SF often at the forefront of many recent years of dystopian/utopian books – from Iain M. Banks to Greg Egan – it's likely that the cognoscenti will foresee the clever twists which Jonze's scenario eventually surrenders its central human-adventure plotline to. Sam's post-verbal comms about philosophy, with a hyper-intelligent reconstructed persona, should have warned hapless sapien Theo that all his romantic illusions were doomed.

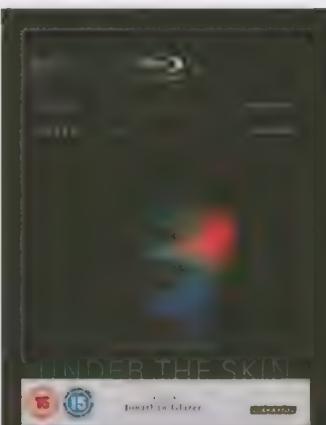
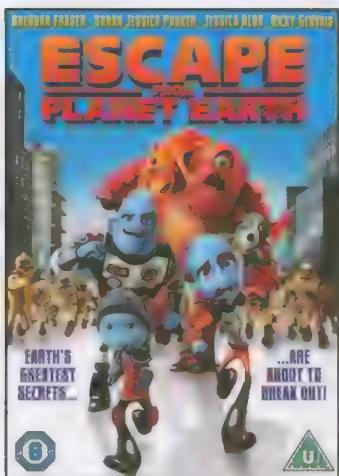


Intuited by signal traffic between my imagined Culture ships 'Thoughts Having Occurred...' and 'Never Mind What For', I found the rapid evolution towards machine transcendence for Sam's AI group painfully predictable. As if he's never even heard of the positronic immortality of a *Bicentennial Man*, perpetually luckless Theo blunders onwards (but not actually 'moving forward' as the movie's repetitive phrase suggests) without realising that Sam's development to sublimation would lead to a maturity far beyond his possessive monogamy. In that respect, the (still unproven!) adage that SF is merely a subdivision of children's literature – something which certainly applies to too many genre movies – seems relevant to *Her* when considering that beatific/

plastic smile that Phoenix adopts for Theo's various cute poses. Although this is essentially a serious movie about male passivity, its Johansson-on-line-one fantasy is no answer to macho dominance or aggression.

Scarlett in the flesh – so to speak – is the stranger attraction of Jonathan Glazer's phenomenally exquisite **UNDER THE SKIN** (Blu-ray/DVD, 14 July).

A bizarre mix of *Species* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, there is no laboratory work or misunderstood fortune-mongering eccentricity in this rather unhealthily downbeat Quatermass-derivative, art-house production. After the stunningly surreal intro there are a few extraordinary scenes of low-key weirdness, but this is a slow-burning puzzle of wholly



minimalist sci-fi. However, like Cantor fractals (Sierpinski carpet or Menger sponge) illustrate how less content results only in more details, the emotional voids of significant, gloomy purpose in this estranged alien's furtive odyssey mean that *Under the Skin* is a fascinating mystery thriller, one that's hypnotically Lynchian in its tone, if not its genre substance and sometimes painterly visual style.

Johansson's portrayal of a pretty, but almost golemic, succubus-from-the-stars seems just as socially inept as any visiting foreigner, and there's certainly no avoiding the disconcerting effect of a Hollywood face roaming the back streets and hill walks of Scotland. She drives around in a delivery van, picking up men that are ceremoniously dumped

into an otherworldly black hell that's a vaguely Lovecraftian pit, which works like a filtering medium, and its vague function recalls the disturbing notion of human beings harvested for mere flavouring, as described in 1979's *Quatermass* mini-series. She appears at home in the dark but looks completely lost in daylight fog. While she's clearly a predator, she becomes practically catatonic when confronted by kindness.

Glazer's direction embraces a documentary realism that's repeatedly startling, especially in urban scenes, where the ordinary city and workaday town lanes appear just as if seen through alien eyes, observing people with coolly inhuman detachment. This is moody SF, with a frighteningly violent finale as the hunter becomes the prey.

-WIN-

We have 3 *Under the Skin* Blu-rays and 3 soundtrack CDs to give away to 3 lucky Interzone readers

To enter the draw simply email your name and postal address, using *Under the Skin* as your subject line, to uts@ttapress.com before the closing date of 31 July

Winners will be notified by email



Made in 1986, Leos Carax's supposedly futuristic drama *Mauvais Sang* ('bad blood') is re-titled **THE NIGHT IS YOUNG** for DVD (23 June, above). It stars Juliette Binoche and Denis Lavant as Anna and Alex, another of this art-house director's doomed couples. The setting is a Parisian future like something from Godard's dystopian *Alphaville*, so don't expect any similarities to Hollywood sci-fi. A cardsharp and ventriloquist, Alex has just broken up with his girlfriend Lise (Julie Delpy), but she pursues him while he is recruited for a heist by a shambolic pair of crooks who apparently need Alex's skills to steal the cure for new disease STBO, a bizarrely moralistic retrovirus that only kills people who have sex without love. Prep for the job involves a parachute practice jump in training for an escape from France. Halley's Comet reportedly causes a snowstorm after a heatwave, but weather conditions have little impact upon the vague plot, and it (the comet) is only mentioned in the movie as a rarity, something therefore ominous that brings its own cosmic fate, like alien gravity that somehow pulls characters from their chosen paths.

Seemingly intended to evoke

Hitchcock style capers and European underworld mystery, Carax's movie has an absurdly leisurely build-up to its main action sequence – which is, of course, anticlimactic. Even the characters are ciphers and just a delivery system for long rambling conversations. It's a movie composed of pleasant curiosities and infrequently ecstatic movement (on the soundtrack, Bowie's 'Modern Love' song is there to provide a street-prowling Alex with a tiredly laughable freak-out moment), and it's a movie about smoking. Yes, if you want to act for Carax, you've got to smoke. The habit is evidently not an addiction, though. Clearly, this smoking malarkey is the cool essence of urban noir. It sets the players and this scenario apart from any reality. Binoche and Lavant were better than this – in both their characters and performances – in Carax's beguiling tragedy *The Lovers on the Bridge* (1991).

Carax's first movie, **BOY MEETS GIRL**, is available too (DVD, 23 June), and there's a Blu-ray boxset of that with *TNIY*, plus the director's more recent surrealist anthology-movie *Holy Motors* (*Black Static* #33) due out 27 October.

After *Metropolis*, director Fritz Lang filmed another of his wife Thea von Harbou's SF novels. Made in 1929, silent classic **FRAU IM MOND** (aka *The Woman in the Moon*, Dual Format, 25 August) became one of the premier genre dramas of its Weimar era.

In the mission's overlong preamble, establishing characters and motives (that include gold prospecting) of the crew, the story notes sacrifices of the space pioneers killed on earlier flights. Although, from today's perspective, the spaceship's interior/set design seem to owe rather more to Verne than Clarke, the picture's visionary miniatures and camera effects offer some impressive approximations of NASA's massive V.A.B. and Apollo's launch-pad, as realised forty years later, and so this vintage sci-fi is convincing as a demo of the practical details required for a moon-shot, multi-stage rocket and all.

The stowaway boy wallows in

*Tony also reviews a great many DVDs and Blu rays for our sister magazine *Black Static*, some of which we offer in easy to enter competitions.*

*In *Black Static* #41, out now, Tony covers a great many new and forthcoming releases, including *The Last Horror Movie*, *Rapture*, *I Frankenstein*, *Cellar Dweller*, *The Pit aka Jug Face*, *True Detective*, *True Blood Season Six*, *13 Sins*, *Haunter*, *Devil's Due*, *Delivery*, *The Attic*, *Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Forgotten*, and others.*

*You can get *Black Static* delivered at the same time as *Interzone* by taking out a discounted dual subscription on our secure website shop at [ttapress.com/shop/](http://ttagpress.com/shop/).*



his adventure, while the supposed adults fail to acknowledge that it's a bit late for arguments over ambition and jeopardy when they are looking down upon the lunar dark side. It all gets silly when there is atmosphere beyond the landing site, where the nutty professor uses a dowsing rod to find water,

but this melodrama fulfils most of the SF criteria for a horribly dated interplanetary romance. While the men-folk bicker and fight, revealing their fathomless hubris, the lone heroine puts her desert-hiking boots on and tackles the scientific job of filming the moon-scape, such as it is. Obviously, this

fantasy Moon is not the airless satellite we all know about now, but *Frau im Mond* boasts an effective moral dilemma for its final chapter, and it took screen sci-fi a couple of steps closer to reality simply by not having anything like the Selenite aliens of Wells' turn-of-the-century book *The First Men in the Moon* (filmed in 1964, with Harryhausen's animation), or the unfeasible space-cannon of Verne's novel *From the Earth to the Moon* (filmed in 1958).

Eureka's masters of cinema edition for Lang's last silent movie includes the 15-minute German documentary featurette *The First Scientific Science-Fiction Film*. It's a great hi-def restoration and a fine Blu-ray to suit many cinema purists, students and scholars, but I just can't help thinking that a colourised version, with subtitles instead of intertitle cards, would be a welcome project and a much better commercial venture for today's media products.

FARTING EXCUSES: ALSO RECEIVED



MIRAGE MEN (DVD, 30 June, above) delves into the twilight zones of US government disinformation conspiracies and military-industrial propaganda that might well have helped create the 20th century's biggest and dumbest religious cult, UFOlogy – or not.

Led by the Shat, humans are cosmic baddies in kids cartoon **ESCAPE FROM PLANET EARTH** (Blu-ray/DVD, 14 July). Smurfs in Area 51...? Mac and



Me for ADHD sprogs? Since such genre spoofs as *Planet 51*, I have realised that I'm far too old for this shite.

HUNTING THE LEGEND (DVD, 21 July, above) is a documentaroid encounter with Bigfoot. Where do they find such crazy folks spreading hoaxes? Honestly, nothing really beats *The Six Million Dollar Man*'s alien-robot myth from the mid-1970s. That was genius!

LATE ARRIVALS

HELIX: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON (DVD, 30 June). Thriller about a team of scientists from the Centre for Disease Control who travel to a high-tech research facility in the Arctic to investigate a possible disease outbreak.

ASHENS (DVD/Blu-ray, 14 July). SF/Fantasy comedy adventure with nods to *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings* and *The Goonies*.

THE DOUBLE (DVD/Blu-ray, 4 August). Richard Ayoade's adaptation of the Dostoyevsky novella. (Theatrical release reviewed by Nick Lowe in issue #252.)

STOP PRESS: HUNTING THE LEGEND release date postponed till 5 January 2015.

MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

EDGE OF TOMORROW

X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

TARZAN

GODZILLA

MALEFICENT

LEGENDS OF OZ: DOROTHY'S RETURN

PATEMA INVERTED

UPSIDE DOWN

TRANSCENDENCE

THE YOUNG AND PRODIGIOUS T.S. SPIVET

Weren't we just here? Did we already do this, or is this sense of *déjà vu* merely the anticipation of a familiar disappointment? Is this the reboot yet, or did we just forget that it never happened? Who is playing Quicksilver, and did he just pull down our pants or were they like that all the time? Has the eating itself already eaten itself? Is our Earth the one whose noosphere is ruled by a gigantic industrialised intellectual-property farm with a modest comics business attached as a loss-leader, where films make films out of films which become about their own recursiveness and the rebooting of narrative, and where the nervous question now is whether new intellectual property is worth the R&D, when old brands can be rebooted indefinitely until victory is achieved? Are we there yet, or did we crash and go back to the start?

Such is the reboot-happy world of the modern blockbuster evoked by **EDGE OF TOMORROW**, which spent most of its production falling off a cliff, only to find itself thrillingly rescued mere inches from a nasty splat-landing. Director Doug Liman, whose previous sf film was the decidedly mixed delight *Jumper*, is notorious in the business for his hair-raisingly indie and improvisational ways with blockbuster budgets and productions, and in an industry governed by reason would be the very last person you'd want to trust with a tightly-wound time-twisting plot and a Tom Cruise tentpole budget on a property with zero punter recognition and a title capable of inducing an anterograde amnesiac state all by itself. To give an idea of the history of violence offscreen, the film's first iteration was a 2010 Black List script by emerging writer Dante Harper, written as a spec for Warners from Hiroshi



Sakurazaka's (subsequently graph-icised) novel *All You Need Is Kill*, about a teenage Japanese grunt in a war against alien invaders who accidentally steals their power of rebooting the day to play over and over till they win, and who teams up with a similarly-endowed American killing machine nicknamed the Full Metal Bitch for a game-inspired mashup of *Starship Troopers* with *Groundhog Day* (or possibly *Source Code* with *50 First Dates*). But even without the Liman factor, the arrival of the distinctly non-teenage and, *Last Samurai* notwithstanding, not conspicuously Japanese Tom Cruise forced some fairly drastic changes to the property. The theatre of war was shunted from the Pacific to London and alien-occupied France, and the Bitch recast accordingly as Full Metal Emily Blunt; the graceless title was replaced by a completely forgettable one; and a series of replacement writers, bizarrely including *Jerusalem* playwright



Jez Butterworth (still credited), did their best to appease the controlling Cruise and the mercurial Liman, who for his part drove producers to prescription abuse by tearing up the script six months before shooting. Eventually Cruise had a quiet word with his current go-to writer Chris McQuarrie, his helmsman on *Jack Ryan* and the new *Mission Impossible*, who triaged the script in the month before shooting without ever looking at the novel, and has now displaced the luckless Harper entirely from the credits.

To everyone's relief and most people's considerable surprise, the result is far from the apocalyptic planewreck that was on the cards, delivering instead a mostly tight, ingenious, and innovative update of the venerable *Rogue Moon* template for iterable action narrative where you keep getting blown to atoms and going again. In this final recurse of the film's own reboot-camp hell, Cruise is a weaselly media general

busted down to private when he attempts to extricate himself from humanity's last doomed surge to retake France, only to have to hero up when he finds himself plunged into groundhog D-Day and dying a couple of hundred times while he learns his lesson. As he and we grow used to the beats of his day, the pace of the cycle quickens, the gaps in narrative become more casual, and at a crucial point the audience find themselves dropping behind the hero and increasingly tasked with filling the ellipses for themselves. It's getting harder all the time to make Tom Cruise sf films, not least because merely putting him in a film has increasingly the effect of making it all about Scientology whether or not anyone intends it; but he's rather good here, particularly while his character's still being a craven self-serving dick, even if the excavation of his inner hero and Operating Thetan within by fast-forwarding through his lives has a little too much cultic

"To everyone's relief and most people's considerable surprise, the result is far from the apocalyptic planewreck that was on the cards"

resonance to pass entirely beneath the threshold of attention. The third act was concocted in haste, but its palpable sense of depleted invention is partly the result of unavoidable constraints: that Tom clearly has to lose the power and play the finale with real-world, one-shot, life-or-death stakes, and a final sacrifice payoff with a redemptive twist reward. The novel has a rather cooler, darker climax where the hero and heroine, who in this version are both time-looping, discover that the only way to thwart the alien prescience is for one of them to kill the other (at the end of a day which has finally managed to wind the complete loop from meet-cute to consummation into its span). But never in a thousand lifetimes were we going to get that.



Edge's script-rebooter Chris McQuarrie made his name on *The Usual Suspects*, which was also the film that propelled Bryan Singer to the *X-Men* franchise and changed the course of blockbuster history. Singer's trumpeted homecoming to the series with **X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST** is in part an act of atonement for almost destroying the two biggest franchises in comics when he bailed on *The Last Stand* to make *Superman Returns* instead; and franchise veteran Simon Kinberg's screenplay is a confident if cluttered reunion of old friends credited and pop-up, in a generously expanded version of Claremont's twin-timed tale of a future X-Man sent back

into the younger version's head to preempt the X-termination of mutantkind at the hands of the Sentinel killbots. It's easily the most complex transformation yet of a major franchise universe, bending the series' increasingly centrifugal spin-offs, prequels, and reboots back into a single continuity by folding the Fox franchise's past and future (which, to complicate things further, are in internal continuity the other way around) back together so that a new future (or past) is born out of the Singer-Vaughn canon while *Last Stand* and the *Wolverine* films are erased from the memory of all but the hero and his mentor, who in this film are also the other way about. By a productive

accident, the X-Men films have wound up extending their universe backwards and forwards in tandem, resulting in the only comics franchise whose history is laid out before us as a sixty-year whole; and the coexistence of original and reboot cast allows the continuing dramatisation of a complete generations-spanning allohistory of our own world from the Silver Age to the Age of Apocalypse, with *Days'* end-credit tease extending the canon into gulfs of time deeper still.

It's not a film that's particularly bothered with explaining its narrative conveniences – why walking through walls gives you the power to send consciousness through time, or how the resurrected Charlie Xavier managed to end up in an identical body (Kinberg and Brett Ratner have different definitive answers to this one) with identically non-working legs, or just how Raven's DNA enables the Sentinels to anticipate and counter mutant powers like *Edge of Tomorrow*'s Mimics – while the passage of a decade since First Class with the story essentially on hold is a funny kind of homage to the First Class's years of action, and the original cast feel a bit narratively boxed-in thanks to the deletion of their big-mission set piece to rescue Rogue from the Sentinel-occupied X-mansion. But if it's an early certainty that the finale will involve gigantic battles in two timelines intercut and temporally intertwined, the middle of the film is refreshingly unpredictable after the original plot wraps up at the midpoint and the mission angles off unexpectedly elsewhere. By the end of the film, we're deep into Abrams *Star Trek* space, rewinding slowly through the past of a reset canon future which may or may not have jumped both rails and shark. Next stop is a 1983-set *Age of Apocalypse*, which could easily be just that.

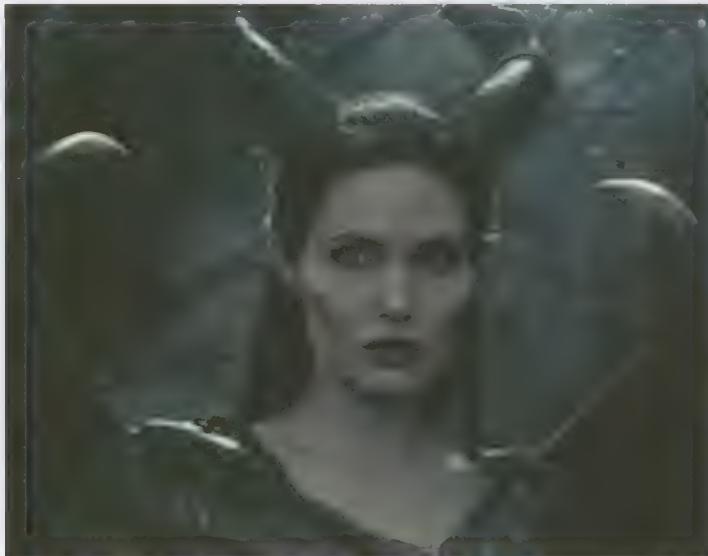
The great-granddaddy of modern franchise branding makes his post-millennial return in the German-produced mocapimation **TARZAN**, with Kellan Lutz voicing and part-performing a new iteration of ERB's iconic vine-swinger after sixteen years away from screens. This Tarzan for our time is no longer an English lord but an American energy baron, a scion of the new global aristocracy as the lost heir to multinational "Greystoke Energies", his parents victims of a nefarious boardroom clash between conservation and exploitation of a lost meteorite deep in mountain-gorilla country. Fortunately plucky conservationist Jane Porter is on hand to draw Tarzan back to civilisation by the eternal power of ape-boy and hot teen in tropical kit. Tarzan find human girl unconscious! Tarzan take advantage! Tarzan abduct to mating dungeon cave! It's fairly primitive stuff, but the thing it gets right is that Tarzan is a gift to the modern medium of motion-captured 3D, with some superb ape mummery under the choreography of the legendary Peter Elliott, who made his name as the lead suit performer in *Greystoke*. Of course it'll be swiftly erased from memory and canon come David Yates' live-action reboot, but those are the breaks.



The most famous of all man-in-a-suit performances makes its own mocap debut in Gareth Edwards' **GODZILLA**, which has seen the king of the monsters stomping back over the Pacific box office to remind the Fukushima generation who's the daddy. With a keen eye for someone with the skillset to leverage a thrilling film from a terrible script and great actors wantonly miscast, Disney have now recruited Edwards to the biggest reboot of them all, the extended *Star Wars* franchise. It's been a steep ramp up from the 3-man crew, scriptless shoot, and bedroom-made effects of his debut *Monsters*, but nobody could say he hasn't earned his shot at the prize. This *Godzilla* has some big ideas about what a *Gojira* for our times needs to do: to speak to our age's nuclear and environmental anxieties as his grandfather spoke to his; to go straight to universe, with Goji merely the apex predator and enforcer of harmony in an instant kaiju ecosystem whose lower denizens come Cloverfielding out of the ocean to trash our cities and shut down our grids till the boss comes to give them a talking-to. But the human drama is woeful, with Aaron Taylor-Johnson's hurt-locker vet

"The showreel shot of the marines making the drop through the darkness and smoke to Ligeti's *Requiem* is epic poetry of a peculiar and wonderful kind"

caught between jeopardised young family and an obsessed dad who papers his walls with cuttings saying things like NUCLEAR CRISIS GROWS to remind him the nuclear crisis is growing, while overqualified stars like Ken Watanabe and for some reason Sally Hawkins are crammed into cameos that push their powers of something-from-nothing to their limit. But the monster sequences are stunningly conceived and executed, often cutting away from straight-ahead kaiju-on-kaiju combat entirely in favour of more oblique and resonant shots of media reaction and aftershock, and carefully framing all the money shots with a foreground for scale. The showreel shot of the marines making the drop through the darkness and smoke to Ligeti's *Requiem* is epic poetry of a peculiar and wonderful kind; and even the Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organisms steal a bit of romance and sympathy from the climax of Edwards' own *Monsters*.



Another misunderstood monster has a redemptive reboot in **MALEFICENT**, an ungainly revisionist live-action hash-up of Disney's 1959 *Sleeping Beauty*, the film whose lukewarm box-office appeal put the animated Disney fairytale to sleep for thirty years. *Maleficent* is old Disney rearing up in defence of its core values and fairytale crown jewels as its younger progeny threaten to ride off with the pick of the treasure. In contrast to Disney's new star creator Jennifer Lee of *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen*, *Maleficent*'s architect Linda Woolverton is old-Disney aristocracy: the writer who first took the gospel of the hero's journey from Chris Vogler's famous memo to the heart of Disney's creation with *The Lion King* and *Mulan*, and would go on to lay the foundation stone of the company's live-action revisionings with Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*. But Burton very sensibly turned *Maleficent* down, no doubt recognising an irreparably wonky concept that subsequent script-doctoring has proved unable to keep on its feet. In this incarnation, the ill-named fairy who lays the curse on the Princess Aurora isn't born bad but just a victim of abuse at the hands of a treacherous childhood sweetheart. "He told her it was true love's kiss, but it was not to be"; and sure enough once she grows into Angelina Jolie with scary wired Rick Baker cheekbones, he date-roofies her and hacks off her faerie wings, leaving Prince Hans looking a bit of an amateur beside him. True, she does do a bit of ill-advised cursing, but as soon as Princess Aurora grows into a wig-trailing Elle Fanning (who turns out to be completely at sea when called on to play wet and simpering) she repents and spends the rest of the film trying to undo what she has made, with results that might be more interesting if the defining twist hadn't been preemptively stolen by *Frozen*, which somehow got studio permission to make off with the ending from under its rival's nose. Clonkingly on-the-nose narration oversells the Bechdel credentials, only to undermine them by yet again erasing the mother from the screen and making it all about daddies and daughters, with even the inconvenient queen's premature death happening offscreen on the cutting-room floor. Legendary production designer Robert Stromberg, who dressed *Avatar*, *Alice*, and *Oz*, is on more subdued visual form as director, and doesn't seem terribly at ease with his actors. But people have gone to see it, so it's a certainty that Disney will only be encouraged to further malfeasance.

LEGENDS OF OZ: DOROTHY'S RETURN is a complex derivative of Baumian intellectual property, a direct musical sequel to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* drawn not from the original cycle but from a 1989 novel by Frank's grandson Roger S. Baum, part of the Baum estate's extended Oz canon and thus a different universe again from the MGM/Warner and Disney variations of the Oz cinematic universe, each with its copyrighted likenesses and design elements. In its film version the plot has a lot of Woolverton's *Alice in Wonderland* about it, as Dorothy suffers a further concussive episode and finds herself and Toto back in Oz years later (though only the next day in her own life) to face a darkness that has fallen upon the kingdom in her absence, while back home in Kansas the tornado victims face eviction and exploitation at the hands of predatory disaster-chasers that only Dorothy can thwart. The title suggests franchise aspirations, but they'll be lucky; the budget seems to have gone on the songs rather than the animation, and the musical numbers are like watching Sims karaoke.



Yasuhiro Yoshiura's anime oddity **PATEMA INVERTED** has had a curious release pattern, restricted to a handful of kids-only weekend shows outside its festival screenings, but derives some ingenious twists of action, orientation, and serial conceptual breakthrough from its premise of a failed experiment that has reversed gravity for part of the planet and divided the survivors into mutually hostile domains. But when the intrepid princess Patema ventures out of Plato's cave into the topsy-turvy world of her enemies, she strikes up a forbidden friendship that sets her on a path to the exposure of a series of secrets about her world and the truth about her missing father's fate. The influence of Miyazaki's Laputa is evident, and perhaps also of Naohisa Inoue's Iblard art as featured in *Whisper of the Heart*; but Yoshiura's film specialises in vertiginous inversions of orientation and perspective, which its plot ties to increasingly outré revelations about the experiment, its consequences and implications, and realises in an inventive cascade of artful upside-down stunts.

Juan Solanas' live-action version of the same conceit in **UPSIDE DOWN** has also finally started to peep shyly out on the festival circuit, after a couple of years on the shelf and clearly no realistic prospect now of a wider UK theatrical release. This variation has Jim Sturgess' and Kirsten Dunst's star-crossed lovers inhabiting near-contiguous binary planets whose matter and inhabitants remain (preposterously) constrained by their native gravity on one another's worlds, so that Sturgess has to stuff his shoes and pockets with souvenirs from wealthy Up Top to go clumping round undetected on the ceiling to visit his quondam teen sweetheart who's forgotten all about him since the head injury she sustained falling out of the sky. Full of ravishingly impossible greenscreened digital vistas, it's one of those Euro-hashes that depend for their existence on continental funders' inability to recognise a dead-on-its-legs script. The actors struggle, the dialogue squelches, and the plot emits the sound of a deflating bladder. But it does look lovely, bless it.

A hardy less high-concept romance is the year's big-budget sf flop **TRANSCENDENCE**, in which Rebecca Hall has to deal with her cybergenius husband turning into Skynet after he gets poloniumed by Kate Mara's sinister patissière in a backfiring attempt to prevent the coming singularity. Johnny Depp's performance is inevitably a bit Skyped-in, consisting as it does mostly of a digitally-distressed face playing a machine simulation of himself; but the plot escalates nicely through its levels, as what starts as a race to save Depp's mind (as in *Save control-S*) by backing his consciousness up to the cloud becomes the beginning of something much bigger, with Depp taking control first of the internet and then of the nanofabric of matter itself, and Hall discovering that the downside of being married to God is that He can be really rather controlling. Another script that went through some odd changes in development, it's eliminated the original love-triangle between Depp, Hall, and bestie/rival Paul Bettany, as well as an originally still more spectacular third-act apocalypse – the last presumably to preserve the intermittent side-mystery over whether the ghost in the machines was ever her husband at all or a sinister AI opportunistically mimicking a human identity for its own advantage. It's unfortunate that the film's found itself the poster-child for the riskiness of original narrative property in the blockbuster market – not just as its actual originality is fairly moot, the essential concept going back at least to Budrys' *Michaelmas*, but because for all its fluffs it's a film with a proper sf arc that changes up through conceptual gears in a way that Hollywood rarely has the patience or thoughtfulness to attempt.



Jean-Pierre Jeunet's **THE YOUNG AND PRODIGIOUS T.S. SPIVET** delights in contriving impossible solutions to the manifold bookishnesses of Reif Larson's wilfully unfilmable novel about a boy prodigy with a genius for maps and diagrams, who runs away from home in Montana to ride the transcontinental rails and collect a prize from the Smithsonian, taking with him the unhallowed ghost of a family tragedy and the stolen secrets of his family's past. In the book version, Spivet's precocious infographics unfold his story out of the text and into the margins, while the stolen manuscript of a tantalisingly incomplete and unreliable family history stands as an enigmatic book-within-the-book which T.S. reads and tries to make sense of as he rides. Jeunet pulls out a formidable arsenal of cinematic dazzlingments to translate all this, with mechanical models, animations, popups, cutaways, and characteristically gorgeous set dressing and stunning faux-American location work, while still cleaving closely to Larson's text.

Jeunet's one previous foray into American film with *Alien Resurrection* was a never-again experience for most involved, which is something of a challenge for a film that sets out to celebrate the American landscape and the scientific imagination it nursed. Like his ingenious young hero, he's addressed the challenge by a combination of brilliance and barefaced deception: writing the script in French and getting it translated back by minions, and faking the locations by shooting his ostentatious parade of faux Americana in Alberta with a French-Canadian crew. Jeunet's old lucky charm Dominique Pinon plays a kind of Seasick Steve figure with what must kindly be viewed as a Franco-American accent; and the sf element has been moved around, cutting the journey through a railroad wormhole in the midwest, but rather jarringly introducing a perpetual-motion machine as the fruit of T.S.'s research, with scaled-up implications that unfortunately have no place in the story. The novel's messy climax,

"Jeunet's one previous foray into American film with *Alien Resurrection* was a never-again experience for most involved"

with its shaggy-dog narrative of secret scientific societies and tunnels in the wainscoting of America, has been recomposed to bring Helena Bonham Carter (as our hero's fiercely sane entomologist mom) back into the action, while ditching the revelation of her pivotal role in the Smithsonian plot. The stolen journal is now an illustrated family album rather than a suspect biography of an ancestor, and the final payoff is simplified down to its sentimental basics. It's not a film with an obvious audience, nor one with much interest in playing by others' rules; but at least he's had the courtesy to read the book and reboot it in ways that respect its essential virtues. It won't be enough to save it, but it takes you somewhere never visited before or since. There was once a time when that was what films thought we wanted.

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